

## PLAIN PROSE

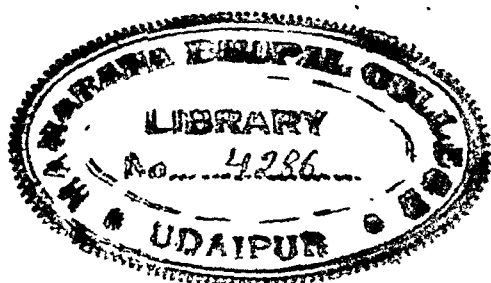
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THE CRAFT OF LITERATURE  
SELECTIONS FROM GEORGE BENTON  
FIRST STEPS TO PARAGRAPHS

# PLAIN PROSE

THE ELEMENTS OF A SERVICEABLE STYLE

BY  
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W: E. W.

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# PLAIN PROSE

## CHAPTER I

### POETRY AND PROSE

#### I

THE first concern of prose is to get itself immediately and continuously understood; and therein resides its most radical difference from the primary aim of poetry. Not for a moment must it be inferred that poetry is simply incantation; but poetry has a prescriptive right of refusal to make plain sense. Much of the finest English poetry expresses a direct and immediate meaning; yet on the other hand, there is as much other fine poetry which, in content, is ambiguous and evasive, and which satisfies us not by the profundity or clarity of its concepts but by its haunting cadence and its panoply of phrase.

At one end of the scale there is Wordsworth's *She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways*, a clear and simple distillation of grief. At the other are such poems as Swinburne's *The Garden of Proserpine*, Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, and de la Mare's *The Listeners*. If those bewildered rationalists who complain that they can't "understand" poetry would stop trying to, they might discover the beauty of such poems as these. Keats is not to be butchered to make a perfect paraphrase, nor Swinburne analysed for the precision of his reasoning. The *Ode to a Nightingale* and *The Garden of Proserpine* both germinate in a mood, and are therefore free from the necessity of developing a strict progression of idea. If they are rightly read they will produce for the reader a mood and not a syllogism. Any poem—even Carroll's *Jabberwocky*—conveys a meaning: but such a poem as Keats's *Ode* yields it up only

when, neglecting the really important aspects of the poem, we attempt to "trace an analysis" of it. Unless we are reading definitely for this secondary purpose, our attention is withheld from analysis and absorbed in mood and music. The authentic function of the poem is to induce, by its rhythmic pattern, by its melody, and by its imagery, a state of submission to poetic magic, an almost hypnotic condition in which we abandon the pursuit of trains of thought and surrender our consciousness to the sensuous enjoyment of sound and image. Great poetry has meaning, profound and sometimes perhaps impenetrable, but that meaning is derived from the poet's intuitions and ecstasies, and not from any initial endeavour to be logical. It is therefore vain to imagine that poetry can be fathomed by the lead-line of logic.

Even when the meaning is fully and immediately obvious, as in *She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways*, the attention already tends to be distracted from it by certain features which are not strictly relevant to the meaning: the imagery of the second stanza, for example. Another poem, Mr. de la Mare's *Nod*, may be cited to illustrate this phenomenon, that even when a poem is plain in meaning, its import may fail to gain precedence in the reader's attention over the rival attractions of music and image.

Softly along the road of evening,  
In a twilight dim with rose,  
Wrinkled with age and drenched with dew,  
Old Nod, the shepherd, goes.

This verse, transparent in meaning though it is, holds a sensitive reader solely by the somnolence of its phrase and rhythm. The fact which it embodies is vaguely absorbed as one reads it; absorbed and forgotten in the sensuous delight evoked by the music of the stanza. Subsequent readings of the verse would diminish rather than develop this indefinite awareness of what the poem is about, and instead would intensify one's interest in the hidden sources of the drowsy melody: the muffled beat of the stresses, the flexible rhythm, and the tremor of alliteration.

This diversion which so much of the best poetry creates between the rational and the æsthetic sensibilities of the reader is manifestly most frequent in lyric; but in dramatic poetry, too, the consecutive presentation of the story of the play is

liable to be frustrated by a passage which soars above sense. In the theatre, if not in the study, many a passage from Shakespeare's plays achieves this transcendent victory over the mere content of the piece. *Macbeth* is packed with electric phrases which vibrate in the memory and which make the listener forget to follow the story of the play. In Richard II's day-dreams the diversion is engendered by the variety of his gilded imagery ; in such lines as these, from *Othello*, the clue of the meaning is time and again forgotten in the overpowering distraction of a phrase :

Not poppy, nor mandragora,  
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep  
Which thou ow'dst yesterday.

And at least twice here, in a passage of very clear meaning, do we feel the wizardry of pure poetry charming us away from the content of the lines :

Either to die the death, or to adjure  
For ever the society of men.  
Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires ;  
Know of your youth, examine well your blood,  
Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,  
You can endure the livery of a nun,  
For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,  
To live a barren sister all your life,  
*Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.*  
Thrice blessed they that master so their blood,  
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage ;  
*But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd,*  
*Than that which withering on the virgin thorn*  
Grows, lives, and dies, in single blessedness.

Here is poetry which is perfectly plain in meaning ; and prose might be content to achieve this clarity of statement—and nothing more. No more is expected of it. But in poetry of this kind your senses are charmed at the same time as your mind is almost subconsciously absorbing the meaning. You understand the words immediately, but your chief attention is diverted to their richness of melody and beauty of phrase.

In meaning, then, poetry may be luminous, or it may be opaque ; and in its second condition be just as perfect poetry

as in its first. And without undervaluing the content of poetry we may reasonably claim that its principal power is not that of stating a case but that of kindling the imagination. A poem may be begotten from a platitude, loosely and illogically developed; yet its imaginative intensity may transfigure its meaning into the most potent suggestion. Because its function is, through melody and image, to minister to our imagination and senses, it may flout or forget those precepts of clarity and sequence of thought which govern the composition of prose. Unlike prose it is not limited in intention; and inasmuch as it *owes* no allegiance to logic and intelligibility, it may employ all the apparatus of mystification and spell-binding. If poetry were as rational as prose it would cease to haunt us.

## II

Is prose confined to the pedestrian service of direct and logical expression? There is the evidence of a hundred familiar passages, from the Bible, from Sir Thomas Browne, from Milton, from de Quincey, to compel the denial of any such limitation.

"Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall rise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down, neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended."

It would be difficult to believe that the evangelical appeal of these gorgeous phrases is for any sensitive reader more potent than the appeal to his æsthetic sensibilities. The dominating attraction of the passage is not its content but its rhythmic perfection, its ringing vowel-play, and its splendour of imagery. It is not that there is any unintelligibility in the passage—but one reads it simply without being *aware* of the meaning.

Again in this piece from Wilde's *Intentions* the attraction of rich imagery and plastic rhythm overcomes our interest in the rather frail and fanciful argument :

"The world is made by the singer for the dreamer. . . . On the mouldering citadel of Troy lies the lizard like a thing of green bronze. The owl has built her nest in the palace of Priam. Over the empty plain wander shepherd and goatherd with their flocks, and where, on the wine-surfaced, oily sea, *αἰνός πόντος*, as Homer calls it, copper-prowed and streaked with vermilion, the great galleys of the Danaoi came in their gleaming crescent, the lonely tunny-fisher sits in his little boat and watches the bobbing corks of his net. Yet, every morning the doors of the city are thrown open, and on foot, or in horse-drawn chariot, the warriors go forth to battle, and mock their enemies from behind their iron masks. All day long the fight rages, and when night comes the torches gleam by the tents, and the cresset burns in the hall. Those who live in marble or on painted panel, know of life but a single exquisite instant, eternal indeed in its beauty, but limited to one note of passion or one mood of calm. Those whom the poet makes live have their myriad emotions of joy and terror, of courage and despair, of pleasure and of suffering. The seasons come and go in glad or saddening pageant, and with winged or leaden feet the years pass by before them. They have their youth and their manhood, they are children, and they grow old. It is always dawn for St. Helena, as Veronese saw her at the window. Through the still morning air the angels bring her the symbol of God's pain. The cool breezes of the morning lift the guilt threads from her brow. On that little hill by the city of Florence, where the lovers of Giorgione are lying, it is always the solstice of noon, of noon made so languorous by summer suns that hardly can the slim naked girl dip into the marble tank the round bubble of clear glass, and the long fingers of the lute-player rest idly upon the chords. It is twilight always for the dancing nymphs whom Corot set free among the silver poplars of France. In eternal twilight they move, those frail diaphanous figures, whose tremulous white feet seem not to touch the dew-drenched grass they tread on. But those who walk in epos, drama, or romance, see through the labouring months the young moons wax and wane, and watch the night from evening unto morning star, and from sunrise unto sunseting, can note the shifting day with all its gold and shadow. For them, as for us, the flowers bloom and wither, and the Earth, that Green-tressed Goddess as Coleridge calls her, alters her raiment for their pleasure. The statue is concentrated to one moment of

perfection. The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change. If they know nothing of death, it is because they know little of life, for the secrets of life and death belong to those, and those only, whom the sequence of time affects, and who possess not merely the present but the future, and can rise or fall from a past of glory or of shame. Movement, that problem of the visible arts, can be truly realized by Literature alone. It is Literature that shows us the body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest."

There is a kind of prose which transcends plain fact and reason, transcends it so completely as to compel us to recognize the truth that the terms *poetry* and *prose* are not mutually exclusive. "There have been many most excellent poets that never versified," said Philip Sidney; and in the prose of an essay, a travel-sketch, or a novel we may come upon some momentary defection from the functions of description or story-telling: momentary, as all poetry is, in its rapturous ascent above the phenomena of fact. A piece of prose may attain poetry in one or in both of two senses. It may, for a brief period, fall under the sway of strong rhythm, suggestive imagery, and iridescent phrase—as Wilde's does—and adopt the unmistakably authentic ritual speech of poetry; or it may be kindled into that sudden mood of passionate feeling wherein the significance of the actual and the external transfigures people and places and facts into radiant symbols. The latter pages of Conrad's great story, *Youth*, achieve poetry in this sense.

There appear, then, in what we call prose-writing occasions when the writer is swayed by a mood in which the elucidation of a meaning is not his main consideration, and in which he produces a kind of writing which is poetry in every sense except the technical one, which lacks only that fundamental pattern of sound which is the basis of verse. It should be noted, further, that some exalted prose even tends to approach this pattern; it inclines to the *conscious* cadence of verse: as, for example, the passage from *Isaiah* already quoted.

The customary antithesis between *prose* and *poetry* has long been recognized as misleading, inasmuch as it excludes the liability of prose to become exalted above meaning and to abandon its ordained function of getting itself understood. Wordsworth has very well expressed this inadequacy of the



popular terms : " Much confusion has been introduced by this contradistinction of poetry and prose, instead of the more philosophical one of poetry and matter of fact or science. The only strict antithesis to prose is metre." (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800-5.) So long as this revised definition is implicitly borne in mind we may continue to employ the usual terms of convenience ; so long, that is to say, as we recognize that passages may occur in a piece of prose which are governed by the characteristic attributes of poetry and which are indifferent to the claims of " matter of fact or science."

Mr. Hilaire Belloc has drawn attention to the common habit of confusing these two distinct kinds of prose, and of speaking of the highly conscious variety as though it were a far finer kind than mere serviceable prose. In suggesting that the first kind should be classified as *rhetoric*, Mr. Belloc implicitly recognizes that it has a different basis from that of the second kind, an emotional and poetic basis. He defines as *rhetoric* " a passage in which the soul is stirred by a choice of rhythm and sound, and a mystical connotation of words in some passage not definitely reduced to versification." In contrast to this, " the excellence of prose lies in its adaptation to the function of intelligent expression or of narration. It is a statement ; the end of it is not the exciting of emotion but the clear presentation, whether of a record (in fiction or fact) or of an idea, which the writer desires to communicate to his fellows."<sup>1</sup>

A similar distinction seems to have been in de Quincey's mind when he contrasted the literature of knowledge with the literature of power : " The function of the first is to teach ; the function of the second is to move ; the first is a rudder, the second an oar or sail."

Prose is the language of convenience, not the language of inspiration ; and its primary function is not to create music but to make sense. For this purpose the prose-writer must be governed not by the fervour and the sensuous excitement which sway the poet, but by the lucidity and precision of the logician.

According to his individual preference each student of literature will determine for himself whether, as between poetry and prose, what is lost upon the roundabouts is gained upon the swings. Arnold declared that it is impossible " that

<sup>1</sup> *The Cruise of the " Nona,"* p. 305.

a fit prose should establish itself amongst us without some touch of frost to the imaginative life of the soul," simply because "the needful qualities for a fit prose are regularity, uniformity, precision, and balance"; the qualities, that is to say, of logic and not of imagination. Up to a point, the development of English prose justifies this dictum. Elizabethan prose preserved its imaginative raptures, but it lacked both balance and lucidity; and the long period of painstaking experiment which culminated in the prose of Dryden seemed definitely to indicate that the admirable clarity and sober precision of Augustan prose was to be achieved only by bidding a regretful farewell to the roses and raptures of the poetic fancy. But with the attainment of a sound and serviceable prose tradition, this puritan sobriety began to relax. Having disciplined itself into accuracy and economy of expression, prose was encouraged to beautify itself with the accomplishments of poetic speech; having painfully learned to make sense it could try again to make music. The spinal disease of the typical Elizabethan sentence had been cured by a long period of irons and crutches, and prose was now strong enough to caper again. The diversified achievement of its convalescence is evidenced in the self-confident styles of Gibbon, Burke, Goldsmith, Lamb, de Quincey, Macaulay, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Stevenson. In the practice of contemporary prose this reconciliation of logic with imagination, of precision with colour, is notably effected in the work of such masters as W. H. Hudson, Mr. Max Beerbohm, Mr. Norman Douglas, Mr. George Moore, and Mr. H. M. Tomlinson. Arnold's Four Essentials of a Fit Prose remain the basis of good prose composition; but, liberated from the mere bondage of conveying sense, they have become the shaping and modifying influences of the ever-restless imagination; and in the finest modern practice their function has become that of taking out the dye from the purple passage without destroying its cadence or frustrating its sublimity.

In any literature prose inevitably emerges much later than poetry; inevitably, because it is the expression of that rigour of thought and maturity of judgment which a people acquires only after long education. "A good prose style," says Jespersen, "is everywhere a late acquirement, and the work of whole generations of good authors is needed to bring about the easy flow of written prose." It is not the product of that

natural unschooled fancy which is the seeding-ground of poetic exuberance. Elizabethan poetry vibrates with a prodigality of emotion; but Elizabethan prose is too invertebrate to sustain an argument, or even, save for the miraculous exception of the *Authorized Version*, to describe lucidly an event or an object. That deficiency is wholly due to the circumstance that the prose-writers of that period were uninterested and unpractised in the habit of setting forth their ideas in a rightly-proportioned sentence and in a logical sequence.

Similarly in the individual a capacity for writing prose is a late development, attainable invariably only through direct training. In childhood, when emotion and fancy dominate his mind, one composes jingles which are conveniently free from any logical restraint. It is a period when there is nothing singular in the fancied spectacle of a cow jumping over the moon. Quaint images and pretty rhythms are, respectively, the natural matter and the natural manner of expression. When he makes the dolorous discovery that this is a world in which it is necessary to narrate in precise sequence and grammatical sentences "How I Spent My Christmas Holidays," the shades of the prison-house have begun to close upon the growing child. He is beginning to learn to write prose.

The early prose of most individuals lapses intermittently into the emotional mood, just as early English prose continually strays back to the wine and roses of poetry. In its worst adolescent manifestations this tendency produces that hot-house efflorescence called jargon, or else a pseudo-poetical style which, forsaking the plain road of sense for the lure of a mirage, loses itself in the wilderness. At its best it neglects its first business of getting an idea properly expressed, and sacrifices sense to sound. It kicks over logical forms, chooses words because they sound well and mean nothing, blows bubbles of pretty but inconsequential imagery; and altogether mistakes pretentiousness for poetry.

This adolescent inclination to scorn plain prose often proceeds from the delusion that prose is really easy to write; so easy that it needs adornment. It would be ridiculous to maintain that either prose or poetry is more difficult to write than the other. The technique of each is formidable. The arrangement of words into a melody is no more difficult an exercise than the marshalling of a sound argument into convincing prose; and the composition of a well-cadenced paragraph is

no more arduous an achievement than the neat turning of a sonnet. Prose and poetry are simply different in origin and in purpose. Poetry flights its ideas and its images above the common earth of reason and reality; prose undertakes to communicate ideas, observations, points of view, and plain tales.

Inasmuch as poetry is the product of evanescent emotional moods, its substance may be obscure, illogical, and inconclusive; its appeal is musical, pictorial, sensational. The expression of an argument, a history, a tale, or a scientific exposition through the medium of prose is one that must be governed primarily by logic, governed, that is, by the necessity of getting itself immediately and continuously understood. It is to a consideration of this medium of *serviceable prose* that the subsequent chapters of this book are devoted.

## CHAPTER II

### LUCIDITY (I)

#### I

**T**HE first and continuous duty of the prose-writer is to be lucid. Two aspects of this essential lucidity present themselves for consideration: the first, clearness of conception; the second, clarity in actual composition. The first concerns the condition of the writer's mind before he takes up his pen; the second relates to his technical skill in writing. With the means for attaining lucidity in actual composition we shall be constantly engaged in the later chapters of this book, whose sole aim is to indicate the features of a clear and expressive prose style. At this stage we may consider the necessary mental condition of the writer in that preliminary survey which ought to precede the act of writing.

With the evidence of so much opaque prose daily before our eyes we need make no apology for repeating the neglected platitude that before we write it is necessary to know what we are writing about. "When a man perfectly understands himself," says Coleridge, "appropriate diction will generally be at his command either in speaking or writing." We are familiar with the person who, by temperament or by training (generally legal, political, or ecclesiastical) possesses the accomplishment of talking without saying anything; and he is as facile in print as in conversation. Stevenson managed to write many essays in which we search arduously for a true judgment as for a needle in a haystack; in which "his reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff." Carlyle frequently appears to be writing history when he is projecting panoramic romances. In both cases, the fault, though different in type, is of the same origin, and its reality is not minimized by the incontrovertible fact that both Stevenson and Carlyle were interesting and graphic writers:

they didn't know what they were talking about. That charming old chronicler Topsel wrote an engaging account of the wonders of the orient, among which was the fastidious elephant who refuses to eat his dinner unless sweet herbs are strewn over the borders of his manger. His tales are as charming—and as untrue—as those old maps which record such phenomena as "Here bee mermaids" or "Here dwelleth the two-faced dragonne." Again the same fault: error i' the bill; a confusion of the functions of historian and romancer. The charm of these erratic guides is undeniable. The amiable prattler is often enough a diverting fellow; and in a prosaic age the incorrigible charming liar is as necessary an element of social life as the Fool was in a mediæval court. But the livery of prose is a sober one, and the function of prose is to give a straightforward account of plain fact. Many who profess allegiance to prose cannot resist the lure of the poet's motley, particularly if they inhabit the domain of essays and belles-lettres. Hence such literary chameleons as Lamb and de Quincey, who use the prose mode in the poetic manner.

Evidently much excellent prose has been written of the kind which Mr. Belloc classifies as rhetoric, which, far from being straightforward, has revelled in a perverse conjuring with facts, and has flaunted its perversity in beautiful verbal arabesques. A perfect control of the technique of prose is rare enough and admirable enough in itself to command our approval even when its substance is negligible or inaccurate; but such virtuosity is the exception and not the rule. The apprentice who tries to evade the patient study of his craft by aping the vagaries of his master will soon find how rare the exception is. Lamb is to be admired, but not imitated; de Quincey is an exhibit, not a model.

## II

If we consider prose as divisible broadly into two kinds, we shall find that in each case it is the product of the same preliminary conditions of observation and selection. Whether the composition is to be a narrative, a description, or any other kind of report of objectivity; or whether, on the other hand, it is to be an essay in ethics or immortality or in any other kind of subjective material—the preliminaries demand the same attributes on the part of the writer.

The major modes of prose, those, for example, of fiction, are too extensive to be examined here ; but we may indicate how, in the novel, the final effects depend on the care with which these preliminaries have been carried out. Best-sellers can be manufactured in mass quantities from some familiar plot-matrix which has been used a thousand times before ; but a novel of quality does not depend upon a slick plot. It derives its power from the fixity and the intensity with which the novelist has scrutinized some slice of life ; from the precision with which, like a naturalist analysing the teeming life of a dirty little pond, he circumscribes and examines some unified aspect or phase or locality of life : witness Hardy's Egdon Heath, Galsworthy's Forsyte species, Conrad's theme of heroic endeavour, Bennett's Five Towns, Wells's Lower Suburbia. The basis of reality which every good novel is founded upon, its fidelity to truth both in its delineation of character and scene and in its evocation of the glamour of a specific locality are the most positive indications of the axiom that persistent observation is the first discipline which the writer of prose must accept.

Manuals of composition, in the few instances where they are concerned at all with anything but rule-of-thumb methods, commonly advise the writer first to observe, and then to select and sift, before beginning to write. A pillar-box analogy is implied. The pillar-box is the writer's mind, full of a higgledy-piggledy mass of ideas and impressions dropped in all the day long. This unsorted material is collected when something needs to be written, sifted into tidy piles of paragraphs, and presently delivered in prose. But the analogy needs adjustment, for it overlooks one of the chief difficulties of the pre-compositional stage : the definition by the prospective writer of a field of expression which is neither too broad nor too narrow for him to plough successfully. The progression of the stage of preparation is not : Observation, Selection, Composition. It is Selection, Scrutiny, and Composition.

It is the first of these which baffles most writers ; the selection of a theme which is well within their scope and experience. The writer may equally well fail to realize which *mode* is best suited to his purpose and his capacities. There have been poets of repute who chose the reflective sonnet-form for a dramatic theme, or who, like Shelley, thought the novel was their aptest medium. There have been novelists

who never discovered they were born essayists ; and playwrights who were born pamphleteers. There have been critics and philosophers who remained third-rate because they mistook poetry for the mode which is best adapted to didactic statement. Sometimes the writer is handicapped by circumstances which he can neither ordain nor control ; as when a schoolboy is required by an incompetent examiner to discourse about Unemployment or Instinct and Intelligence or The Value of Poetry in the Study of History. And the conjunction of the reading public's low standard of criticism with the mercenary instincts of certain story-tellers can daily permit the production of false and meretricious novels of Sahara love whose sole basis in experience may be a six weeks' conducted tour in cushioned coaches through Algeria and Tunisia.

The material which the schoolboy should be required to work upon is evidently the concrete substance of his daily life and experience, not the threadbare second-hand stuff, particularly of the abstract kind, which he takes on trust from parent or teacher or children's newspaper or cigarette card. His world is even more limited than the world of an adult ; but those limits define the scope of his knowledge and therefore of his interest ; and within them there is an inexhaustible mass of material. It is only when he is led to believe that the tremendous trivialities of his daily life are of no moment to his elders that he confesses (and quite honestly) that he has "nothing to write about." When he is persuaded that slug-hunting and Conkers and The Truth About Masters are realities that we wish to hear about, his mind and his pen will move.

This definition of his scope of interest must be realized and accepted by every one who wishes to develop an exact and adequate command of prose. If the subject matter is foreign or unfamiliar, no amount of technical accuracy in writing can conceal its lack of tone and reality. And the difficulties of handling such material will increase the likelihood of technical defects ; for so much of the writer's attention will be occupied in trying to grasp the elusive subject-matter that his command of form and phrase will waver. The greater his familiarity with his theme, the more can the writer concentrate his attention upon the technical aspects of his work. If the sentimental schoolgirl would forswear her attempts to incarnate a convincing sheik out of the froth of her filmy imagination



and try instead to describe the room in which she works and dreams, she might rid herself of her amorphous condition of mind, and by learning to set down the evidence of her own eyes develop the first discipline of all kinds of composition. Writing from observation, on the other hand, develops a respect for accuracy and an attitude of attention ; it limits the tendency to irrelevance ; and can at all stages be tested for its fidelity to fact. — No child would ever begin wasting its time by composing second-hand fairy tales if he were not encouraged to do it by sentimental mothers ; he would much prefer to discourse upon his guinea pigs or his first railway journey. And this innate clearheadedness of the child should be recovered and practised by all who hope to write readable prose.

The first essential, then, is that his material should be familiar to the writer. Equally important is it that the material should be interesting. Mere familiarity with an object may produce a careless and spiritless account of it. Many a droning university don illustrates in the tedium of his lectures this possibility of divorce between knowledge and interest. It is true that, even without any flavour of interest, clear and immaculate prose may be written, just as a backcloth may be painted which looks uncommonly like a cherry orchard. There is inevitably in a piece of fine prose more than precision and clarity : there is a pervasive zest, a breath of life such as makes Conrad's jungle and Dickens' London and H. G. Wells's Moon glamorous and habitable places. Both familiarity and interest must precede any attempt to write. There is no validity in the contention that any general principle is to be derived from such a capacity as Disraeli's : of being able to write very accurately and convincingly about dukes at a time when he had never even seen one. The talent for conjuring realism out of imagination is as rare as that of producing a beautiful houri out of a stage magician's cabinet ; and the tricks of the literary Maskelynes are not models for the modest apprentice. This double-barrelled axiom should therefore be accepted and practised by every beginner in prose-composition : that you can't write lucidly about what you don't intimately know and about what doesn't interest you. The first care should be to select very carefully a subject, or a point of view of a subject, which allows scope for the knowledge and the enthusiasm of the writer. Although a subject may appear on the whole unattractive, yet a particular aspect

and, of hysterical newspapers during a national crisis—as being “not so much published as carried into the streets foaming at the headline.” This miniature so perfectly done by Katherine Mansfield picks out from a mass of detail exactly those features which bring the scene so vividly to life:

“Round the corner of Crescent Bay, between the piled-up masses of broken rock, a flock of sheep came pattering. They were huddled together, a small, tossing, woolly mass, and their thin, stick-like legs trotted along quickly as if the cold and the quiet had frightened them. Behind them an old sheep-dog, his soaking paws covered with sand, ran along with his nose to the ground, but carelessly, as if thinking of something else. And then in the rocky gateway the shepherd himself appeared. He was a lean, upright old man, in a frieze coat that was covered with a web of tiny drops, velvet trousers tied under the knee, and a wideawake with a folded blue handkerchief round the brim. One hand was crammed into his belt, the other grasped a beautifully smooth yellow stick. And as he walked, taking his time, he kept up a very soft light whistling, an airy, far-away fluting that sounded mournful and tender. The old dog cut an ancient caper or two and then drew up sharp, ashamed of his levity, and walked a few dignified paces by his master’s side. The sheep ran forward in little pattering rushes; they began to bleat, and ghostly flocks and herds answered them from under the sea. “Baa! Baaa!” For a time they seemed to be always on the same piece of ground. There ahead was stretched the sandy road with shallow puddles; the same soaking bushes showed on either side, and the same shadowy palings. Then something immense came into view: an enormous shock-haired giant with his arms stretched out. It was the big gum-tree outside Mrs Stubbs’s shop, and as they passed by there was a strong whiff of eucalyptus. And now big spots of light gleamed in the mist. The shepherd stopped whistling; he rubbed his red nose and wet beard on his wet sleeve and, screwing up his eyes, glanced in the direction of the sea. The sun was rising. It was marvellous how quickly the mist thinned, sped away, dissolved from the shallow plain, rolled up from the bush and was gone as if in a burry to escape; big twists and curls jostled and shouldered each other as the silvery beams broadened. The far-away sky—a bright, pure blue—was reflected in the puddles, and the drops, swimming along the telegraph-poles, flashed into points of light. Now the leaping, glittering sea was so bright it made one’s eyes ache to look at it. The shepherd drew a pipe, the bowl as small as an acorn, out of his breast-pocket, fumbled for a chunk of

speckled tobacco, pared off a few shavings, and stuffed the bowl. He was a grave, fine-looking old man. As he lit up and the blue smoke wreathed his head, the dog, watching, looked proud of him."

(From *At the Bay*.)

In the prose of Addison we find the same evidence of sustained and circumambient scrutiny of the subject: he has absorbed the full import and flavour of the idea before him, viewed it from all points of the compass, picked out its complete significance, and poised it just where it will be most effective. This consummate patience in surveying his theme is well displayed in his essay, *Sir Roger and Party Spirit*.

“ . . . There cannot a greater judgment befall a country than such a dreadful spirit of division as rends a government into two distinct people, and makes them greater strangers and more averse to one another, than if they were actually two different nations. The effects of such a division are pernicious to the last degree, not only with regard to those advantages which they give the common enemy, but to those private evils which they produce in the heart of almost every particular person. This influence is very fatal both to men's morals and their understandings; it sinks the virtue of a nation, and not only so, but destroys even common sense.

A furious party spirit, when it rages in its full violence, exerts itself in civil war and bloodshed; and when it is under its greatest restraints naturally breaks out in falsehood, detraction, calumny, and a partial administration of justice. In a word, it fills a nation with spleen and rancour, and extinguishes all the seeds of good-nature, compassion, and humanity.

Plutarch says very finely, that a man should not allow himself to hate even his enemies, 'because,' says he, 'if you indulge this passion in some occasions, it will rise of itself in others; if you hate your enemies, you will contract such a vicious habit of mind, as by degrees will break out upon those who are your friends, or those who are indifferent to you.' I might here observe how admirably this precept of morality (which derives the malignity of hatred from the passion itself, and not from its object) answers to that great rule which was dictated to the world about an hundred years before this philosopher wrote; but instead of that, I shall only take notice, with a real grief of heart, that the minds of many good men among us appear soured with party-principles, and alienated from one another in such a manner, as seems to me altogether inconsistent with the dictates either of reason or religion. Zeal for a public cause is apt to breed passions in the hearts

of virtuous persons, to which the regard of their own private interest would never have betrayed them. /

If this party-spirit has so ill an effect on our morals, it has likewise a very great one upon our judgments. We often hear a poor insipid paper or pamphlet cried up, and sometimes a noble piece depreciated, by those who are of a different principle from the author. One who is actuated by this spirit is almost under an incapacity of discerning either real blemishes or beauties. A man of merit in a different principle, is like an object seen in two different mediums, that appears crooked or broken, however straight and entire it may be in itself. For this reason there is scarce a person of any figure in England, who does not go by two contrary characters, as opposite to one another as light and darkness. Knowledge and learning suffer in a particular manner from this strange prejudice, which at present prevails amongst all ranks and degrees in the British nation. As men formerly became eminent in learned societies by their parts and acquisitions, they now distinguish themselves by the warmth and violence with which they espouse their respective parties.—Books are valued upon the like considerations. An abusive scurrilous style passes for satire, and a dull scheme of party notions is called fine writing.

There is one piece of sophistry practised by both sides, and that is the taking any scandalous story that has been ever whispered or invented of a private man, for a known undoubted truth, and raising suitable speculations upon it. Calumnies that have been never proved, or have been often refuted, are the ordinary postulata of these infamous scribblers, upon which they proceed as upon first principles granted by all men, though in their hearts they know they are false, or at best very doubtful. When they have laid these foundations of scurrility, it is no wonder that their superstructure is every way answerable to them. If this shameless practice of the present age endures much longer, praise and reproach will cease to be motives of action in good men.

There are certain periods of time in all governments when this inhuman spirit prevails. *Italy* was long torn in pieces by the *Guelfes* and *Gibellines*, and *France* by those who were for and against the League: but it is very unhappy for a man to be born in such a stormy and tempestuous season. It is the restless ambition of artful men that thus breaks a people into factions, and draws several well-meaning persons to their interest, by a specious concern for their country. How many honest minds are filled with uncharitable and barbarous notions, out of their zeal for the publick good? What cruelties and outrages would they not commit against men of an adverse party, whom they would honour and esteem, if, instead of considering

them as they are represented, they knew them as they are ? Thus are persons of the greatest probity seduced into shameful errors and prejudices, and made bad men even by that noblest of principles, the love of their country. I cannot here forbear mentioning the famous *Spanish* proverb, *If there were neither fools nor knaves in the world, all people would be of one mind.*

For my own part, I could heartily wish that all honest men would enter into an association, for the support of one another against the endeavours of those whom they ought to look upon as their common enemies, whatsoever side they may belong to. Were there such an honest body of neutral forces, we should never see the worst of men in great figures of life, because they are useful to a party ; nor the best unregarded, because they are above practising those methods which would be grateful to their faction. We should then single every criminal out of the herd, and hunt him down, however formidable and overgrown he might appear : On the contrary, we should shelter distressed innocence, and defend virtue, however beset with contempt or ridicule, envy or defamation. In short, we should not any longer regard our fellow-subjects as Whigs or Tories, but should make the man of merit our friend, and the villain our enemy.”

(*The Spectator*, No. 125.)

With this model of well-considered and lucid prose we may contrast one of Carlyle's diffuse periods. The best of Carlyle, rich in epithet and imagery, belongs to the category of rhetoric ; but even at its best his prose is always liable to be seized with cramp and to knot itself into a tortuous tangle. This liability is mostly attributable to his habit of thinking in rushes, to his passion for trying to carry a position by storm before he has established a perfectly linked line of attack. Impetuous prose is not necessarily clear prose. The application of the slow-motion principle to the following passage would disclose the fundamentally bad technique of Carlyle, that hasty slap-dash treatment of his subject which fills his prose with clumsy and distorted phrases, and to which the grace and clarity of Addison is such a complete antithesis.

“ For out of this that we call Atheism come so many other *isms* and falsities, each falsity with its misery at its heels !—A SOUL is not like wind (*spiritus*, or breath) contained within a capsule ; the ALMIGHTY MAKER is not like a Clockmaker that once, in old immemorial ages, having *made* his Horologe of a Universe, sits ever since and sees it go ! Not at all. Hence comes Atheism ; come, as we say, many other *isms* ; and as the

## PLAIN PROSE

sum of all, comes Valetism, the *reverse* of Heroism; sad root of all woes whatsoever. For indeed, as no man ever saw the above-said wind-element enclosed within its capsule, and finds it at bottom more deniable than conceivable; so too he finds, in spite of Bridge-water Bequests, your Clockmaker Almighty an entirely questionable affair, a deniable affair;—and accordingly denies it, and along with it so much else. Alas, one knows not what and how much else! For the faith in an Invisible, Unnameable, Godlike, present everywhere in all that we see and work and suffer, is the essence of all faith whatsoever; and that once denied, or still worse, asserted with lips only, and out of bound prayer books only, what other thing remains believable? That Cant well-ordered is marketable Cant; that Heroism means gas-lighted Histrionism; that seen with 'clear eyes' (as they call Valet-eyes), no man is a Hero, or ever was a Hero, but all men are Valets and Varlets. The accused practical quintessence of all sorts of Unbelief! For if there be now no Hero, and the Histrion himself begin to be seen into, what hope is there for the seed of Adam here below? We are the doomed everlasting prey of the Quack; who, now in this guise, now in that, is to filch us to pluck and eat us, by such modes as are convenient for him. For the modes and guises I care little. The Quack once inevitable, let him come swiftly, let him pluck and eat me;—swiftly, that I may at least have done with him; for in his Quack-world I can have no wish to linger. Though he slay me, yet will I despise him. Though he conquer nations, and have all the Flunkeys of the Universe shouting at his heels, yet will I know well that *he* is an Inanity; that for him and his there is no continuance appointed, save only in Gehenna and the Pool. Alas, the Atheist world, from its utmost summits of Heaven and Westminster Hall, downwards through poor seven-feet Hats and 'Unveracities fallen hungry,' down to the lowest cellars and neglected hunger-dens of it, is very wretched."

(*Past and Present.*)

Accuracy and brevity are, in the best prose, complementary qualities; for careful scrutiny gives a writer such a clear impression of his theme that he can write of it with decision. Imperfect consideration, on the other hand, betrays itself in a faltering tone, and leaves a bit of writing full of stray ends and afterthoughts which obtrude themselves from the texture of the work. The tone of resolution which pervades the work of one who knows his subject intimately and proportionately is illustrated in this excellently decisive opening sentence from Richard Jefferies' essay, *Wild Flowers*: "A fir-tree is not a

flower, and yet it is associated in my mind with primroses." Such a beginning makes a reader confident that he is in the company of a man who has something illuminating and well-considered to communicate. And this fragment from the work of a modern prose master, Mr. Aldous Huxley, has the same decisive hall-mark of clarity and vigour: ". . . the golden-grey chapel, with its deep geometrical shadows between the buttresses, the comely rose-coloured shapes of the brick-built Tudor buildings, the weather-cocks glittering in the sun, the wheeling flurries of pigeons."

One of the most valuable consequences of a patient scrutiny of subject-matter is that certain technical problems of composition are thereby simplified. It is vital that a piece of prose should reveal a constant unity; and this is possible only when the several aspects of the subject have been considered by a unified vision.

#### IV

The evidence of a writer's success in thus co-ordinating and classifying the units of his subject is to be found, first of all, in the paragraphing of his work. There is a common delusion that a paragraph is just a typographical device to give relief to the reader's eye. The practice of daily newspapers, particularly the picture papers, encourages this notion. The makers of newspapers seem to think, perhaps rightly, that unless they break up their stuff into small fragments the man in the street will be unable to swallow and assimilate his daily nourishment. Thus one of their paragraphs consists of a sentence or two which may or may not be organically related to what comes before or after.

A paragraph is actually a stage of progression, a unified section of the composition; and it should be roughly capable of summary in a single sentence. If after the application of this test there remain loose ends which cannot reasonably be tucked in, the paragraph is defective. If the preliminary scrutiny of the subject has been well carried out, the definition of each stage will be clear in the writer's mind, so that he can note down the title of each and arrange them all in their logical and most effective order. But if the preparation has been omitted or hurried the paragraphs will flow into each other like

paints on a wet surface. No better examples of perfect paragraphing need be sought than Macaulay's; any half-dozen pages from, say, the *Essay on Clive*, will illustrate the unity of each paragraph and the perfect sequence of the entire essay. Macaulay's precision goes to the length of launching a paragraph with a sentence which summarizes what is to come, and of closing a paragraph with a sentence which either recapitulates the substance of the whole paragraph, or which indicates what is to be the substance of the following paragraph.

There are many possible varieties of paragraph-structure. It may be pyramidal, consisting, that is to say, of a dominating central idea posed on secondary accompaniments, such as illustrations, comparisons, and contrasts. On the other hand, the dominant idea may be put first, like a diving-board from which the purport of the paragraph makes an impressive take-off. It may be of a third variety: in which the secondary matter comes first and prepares the way for a dominant final sentence.

## V

One of the consequences of a clear view of one's subject-matter is precision in writing about it; and precision is here synonymous with economy of words. We are familiar with that type of public speaker who ekes out the scantiness of his discourse with sonorous circumlocutions. The failure to realize that prose must avoid the flourish of rhetoric is very widespread. Even advertisement writers, who, more than all others, should realize the necessity of stating facts clearly and simply, resort to pretentious language in crying their wares. It may be that they are ashamed to be considered as mere tradesmen, and therefore masquerade as poets and orators. Here is a candle advertisement: "A parchment yellow, mellow with age, a strange design of Eastern character suited for an ivory carving, proportions worthy of great ceremony—such is our Confucius Candle. It is an artistic achievement which demands a wonderful setting. Graven in wax are the mystery and tradition of the Orient, for ever associated with the wonder of light." Observe the intention of this subtle salesmanship: to beguile the chance reader into thinking that the words are about the romantic East, to get him fast by the button-hole before the bagman says a word about candles. The fellow is



trying to talk about candles ; but all he does talk about is parchments, ivory, mystery, graven, wonderful setting, and the Orient. This kind of titillating arty-ad is popular to-day, especially in the pages of the select middle-class weeklies. The highly-respectable client who reads those pages must not be directly told about the virtues of candles or amplifiers or easy chairs ; he must be wooed with soft and balmy phrases, and only by the most remote and apologetic suggestion must he finally become aware that he is being most genteelly asked to buy somebody's goods. It may be good business, but it develops the detestable habits of euphemism and circumlocution. " Eat more fruit " and " Buy British Goods " may be a little overbearing ; but they are good honest terms.

There are some writers who see and understand their subject clearly enough, but who are temperamentally incapable of brief expression ; who think that a thing is not well said unless it is said at large. This malady was characteristic of the spacious Victorians, particularly of Arnold, in many of whose essays the points are clearly made—but only after an unconscionably long preamble and only when he has said it in half a dozen different ways. Ruskin could be even more incorrigibly periphrastic, and, unlike Arnold, frequently failed to make his point at all. He had a habit of getting his legs tangled in his own ridiculously long driving-reins.

If a writer is born long-winded, like Polonius, he will probably cling to circumlocution all his life ; but if his habit of spreading himself is merely acquired out of the belief, common in intelligent adolescents, that what sounds good necessarily is good, then he may overcome the disability by practising the habit of concentration upon his subject-matter. He must imitate the art of the penguin who spends a considerable time digesting her food before disgorging it again (very briefly and dramatically) for further consumption by her offspring. A useful preliminary exercise of this kind would be to make a *précis* of Ruskin's long and windy periods. The residuum would be remarkably small.

That affliction of prose called Jargon will be considered at length in a later chapter on Diction. Here we may note that, like measles, it attacks most adolescents who, for a brief phase of their lives, hold the delusion that brief and direct expression is deplorably vulgar. The truth is that pithy and precise utterance betokens a clear and active intelligence.

In *Small Talk at Wreyland* Mr. Cecil Torr sets side by side a woolly bit of jargon and its clear-eyed rustic equivalent: "The weather conditions being favourable the psychological moment was indulged in," and, "As 'twere fine, us did'n."

## VI

Lucidity, the first element in good prose, is finally consequent upon careful preparation for the act of composition. It can be achieved only by patient and exhaustive contemplation of the subject; it depends upon the acquisition of that habit of mind which, we repeat, enables the naturalist to survey what hides beneath the surface of his field of vision. The temptation to seize the pen because one has suddenly developed an intuition is to be resolutely quenched. One intuition doesn't make an essay; and the impetuous writer will soon find that his inspiration has dried up, leaving his solitary bright idea forlornly perched in a wilderness of words. If an intuition comes, make a note of it; for, like a new-laid egg, it will be fresh enough for use in a week's time. But make no deviation from the rule that every piece of written work must be preceded by reflection and note-making. Out of patience comes forth clearness. Until he has developed this patient and discerning habit of mind, the beginner cannot hope to write. Once he has acquired it, he will begin to find that the road to good writing is still long and narrow. For, however clear and alert his outlook may be, there are certain determinants of lucidity which are purely technical, rudiments of writing which have to be learned and practised like any other technique. These rules of logic and syntax will be considered in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### LUCIDITY<sub>2</sub> (II)

#### I

THE mental habit of clarity is not alone sufficient to make its possessor a writer of clear prose. Strong power of observation and a well-proportioned sense of values are not uncommon among complete illiterates; intelligent rustics, for example, are frequently unable to write at all. Clear writing, then, depends on the writer's control of technical details. In this chapter we assume that the reader has a reasonably accurate command of the principles, or better, of the practice, of English grammar. But this alone will not prevent the writer from drifting into ambiguity, or even into unintelligibility; and the first part of the present chapter will be concerned with types of defective expression which are not necessarily due to errors of grammar. The latter part of it will indicate other kinds of faulty writing which are more primarily due to the neglect of the rules of grammar.

Lucid style is dependent not upon the choice of exact or arresting words, but upon unity of sentence-structure. Nothing but this can make a piece of prose immediately and continuously intelligible; and the writer's first business in actual composition should therefore be to achieve unity in his sentences.

A unified sentence is not—though it is often erroneously declared to be—a sentence embodying a single idea. In this perfectly unified sentence, for example, there are two separate ideas: "The pomegranate tree, whose fruit was so sought after by Julius Cæsar, was first introduced into Europe by a Sicilian gardener." But, of these two ideas, one is evidently dominant and the other subsidiary. The control of the sentence is vested in the main clause—"The pomegranate . . . was first introduced into Europe by a Sicilian gardener."

A sentence has unity when, despite its length or the number of its clauses, there is a definite central control manifesting itself even in the remotest parts of the sentence. If, on the other hand, the sentence is occupied by a series of independent ideas governed by no central authority, the sentence is in the dangerous condition of disunity; and is like a kingdom at civil war, disrupted by internal dissension. In a unified sentence every qualifying clause is mobilized in such a way as to strengthen the authority of the main clause. No subsidiary clause attempts to rival its supremacy.

Intentional disunity, a confusion deliberately devised, produces an entertaining effect. A character in one of O. Henry's stories writes a letter which offers an amusing example of disunity:

"DEAR JOHN: I just had a telegram saying mother is very sick. I am going to take the 4.30 train. Brother Sam is going to meet me at the depot there. There is cold mutton in the ice-box and I hope it isn't her quunzy again. Pay the milkman 60 cents, she had it bad last spring, and don't forget to write to the company about the gas-meter, and your good socks are in the top drawer. I will write to-morrow. Hastily. KATY."

It is a pity to spoil a good joke by analysing it, yet there is much to be learned from this letter. The twittering uncertainty of its writer's mind accounts for her trick of hopping from theme to theme; but even this tendency she might have partially concealed if she had only been able to write a unified sentence. Within her sentences there are pairs and trios of units each bent on its own purpose and at odds with its neighbours. Each sentence manifests all the weakness of insurrection.

Brevity is not necessarily synonymous with unity; and the shortest sentence may reveal chaos: "My brother has a great admiration for Mr. Selfridge, and I have been privileged to meet him, and he is an unobtrusive man with something of the shy quiet of the poet." Here are three rivals, who, instead of settling down under the control of one of their number, dispute for precedence. The sentence might easily set its house in order by electing one of its units to supremacy, thus: "Mr. Selfridge, for whom my brother has a great admiration, and whom I myself have been privileged to meet, is an unobtrusive man . . ." The sentence is now unified; controlled by one

dominant idea. The position of the three ideas in the sentence has been defined by this reorganization ; and the indispensable one has been raised to authority over the other two. Here is another instance of the lack of central government : "*The policeman* held up his hand, and *the stream* of traffic stopped, and *vehicles* of all descriptions made the block grow bigger every minute, until *it* looked as if *they* could not extricate themselves, but when *the stream* moved on once more it went with the same order as before." The successive changes of subject (emphasized, in reproduction, by the italics) indicate the lack of control in the sentence. It is debilitated by a series of revolutions. Authority is usurped by one idea after another ; there is no cohesion, no centralization in the sentence.

Scott, writing always under circumstances which precluded revision, frequently lapses into such disunified periods as this, from *Woodstock* :

"When he turned, on receiving the signal, he beheld himself close to a young man nearly six feet in height, well made in joint and limb, but the gravity of whose apparel, although handsome and gentleman-like, and a sort of precision in his habit, from the cleanness and stiffness of his band to the unsullied purity of his Spanish-leather shoes, bespoke a love of order which was foreign to the impoverished and vanquished Cavaliers, and proper to the habits of those of the victorious party, who could afford to dress themselves handsomely, and whose rule—that is, such as regarded the higher and more respectable classes—enjoined decency and sobriety of garb and deportment."

In contrast to these examples of disunity, how orderly and well-governed is this period of de Quincey's :

"And often when I walk at this time in Oxford Street by dreamy lamplight, and hear those airs played on a common street organ which years ago solaced me and my dear youthful companion, I shed tears and muse with myself at the mysterious dispensation which so suddenly and so critically separated us for ever."

It is certainly unsafe to generalize by saying that the short sentence is more likely to be unified than the long one. The inexperienced writer would be well advised to write short ones ; but some of the most perfect English prose is composed

in long and elaborate periods. The short sentence is easier to manage ; but, although the big four-in-hand needs more accomplished driving, it makes a brave show with its whirl of flying feet and fluttering ribbons, all perfectly controlled by the man on the box.

The long sentence which is merely built up of a string of parallel clauses, or tricked out with a series of appositions is easy to manufacture. It has unity in the sense that a seed catalogue has unity. But a sustained sentence of interwoven and qualifying clauses is a real test of compositional power. It affords opportunities of expression which the short sentence cannot give ; it is a stringent test of continuity of thought ; and it allows a clear and logical thinker or observer the chance to build up his main point on a wide but closely-knit basis of extensions and modifications. The long unified sentence is a feat of poise and balance ; and is comparable not to the juggler's feat of balancing the contents of the kitchen on the point of a broomstick, but to the architectural achievement of erecting a tall and graceful tower on a narrow but solid foundation. The nineteenth-century prosemen, afflicted though they were with a fancy for obese phrases, had a masterly sense of unity :

" After he had successfully overcome all the various obstacles which, when he was a young man setting out on life's uneven road, had at many different points in his career opposed his onward progress, he pursued unchecked for many successive years a course of uniform prosperity, until at last he reached the ultimate goal towards which from the outset all his steps had been unswervingly directed."

Ruskin was over-addicted to the long sentence, but he was well-practised in the control of the eight-in-hand. This is a sentence of his on the evolution of ships :

" What had once been a mere raft, with rows of formal benches, pushed along by laborious flap of oars, and with infinite fluttering of flags and swelling of poops above, gradually began to lean more heavily into the deep water, to sustain a gloomy weight of guns, to draw back its spider-like feebleness of limb, and open its bosom to the wind, and finally darkened down from all its painted vanities into the long, low hull, familiar with the overflying foam ; that has no other pride

but in its daily duty and victory ; while, through all these changes, it gained continually in grace, strength, audacity, beauty, until at last it has reached such a pitch of all these, that there is not, except the very loveliest creatures of the living world, anything in nature so absolutely notable, bewitching, and, according to its means and measure heart-occupying as a well-handled ship under sail in a stormy day."

A fine sentence marred only by the clumsy epithet, "heart-occupying."

Borrow, usually clear and direct, was inclined to fumble the long sentence. This one, for example, is most distractingly disunified. It is a stampede of ideas which need rounding-up and corraling in separate pens :

"Running after milkmaids is by no means an ungenteeled rural diversion ; but let any one ask some respectable casuist (the Bishop of London for example) whether Lavengro was not far better employed, when in the country, at tinkering and smithery than he would have been in running after all the milkmaids in Cheshire, though tinkering is in general considered a very ungenteeled employment, and smithery little better, notwithstanding that an Orcadian poet, who wrote in Norse about eight hundred years ago, reckons the latter amongst nine noble arts which he possessed, naming it along with playing at chess, on the harp and ravelling runes or as the original has it, 'treading runes'—that is compressing them into a small compass by mingling one letter with another, even as the Turkish caligraphists ravel the Arabic letters, more especially those who write talismans."

A change of structure within a sentence inevitably breaks the unity, as this example shows :

"Books, my son, while they teach us to respect the interests of others, often make us unmindful of our own : while they instruct the youthful reader to grasp at social happiness, he grows miserable in detail, and, attentive to universal harmony, often forgets that he himself has a part to sustain in the concert."

His first plan of construction is : "*While they teach . . . they make,*" a balanced form. But his effort to sustain this form in the second part of the sentence breaks down : thus, "*while they instruct . . . he grows miserable.*" Such an unconscious

change of construction always fractures the unity of the sentence. In a later section other and more striking effects of such a change will be considered; here we are concerned only with its effect on unity. In the next sentence the unity is broken by the involuntary change of subject, from "his imagination" to an implied "he" (before "aspired"). If the "he" is inserted the sentence is rectified grammatically, and we no longer have to read "his *imagination* was limited . . . and aspired only . . ." But the unity is broken. It can be recovered and preserved only by choosing one subject ("he") for the entire sentence, as in (ii):

(i) "Though of an eager and earnest temperament, his imagination was limited, and quite conscious of his powers, being indeed somewhat arrogant and peremptory, aspired only to devote them to accomplishing those objects, which, from his cradle, he had been taught were the worthiest."

(ii) "Though eager and earnest in temperament, he was in imagination limited, and, quite conscious of his powers . . . he aspired only. . . ."

So far, the unity of complex sentences only has been considered. A simple sentence, one consisting of a single direct statement unaccompanied by any qualifying clause, cannot fail to be unified. Evidently a compound sentence, that is, a linked series of simples is unified in so far as the simple sentences are successive links in a consecutive chain of ideas; thus: "I ascended the steps and opened the door, wiped my feet on the mat, and entered the house." When the components are not thus marshalled in direct progressive order, unity is absent: "The Prince rose from his throne, and the wicked fairy cringed before him, but that is what you'd expect and everyone who reads fairy tales knows it, and so the wicked fairy was driven out and the princess was set free, and she and the Prince lived happily ever after."

The beginner would be well advised to delay his experiments with the long unified sentence until he has become fluent and accurate in the use of the shorter forms; and if he needs a model for the short, nimble sentence he may find it in Macaulay or Addison, or in the examples contained in Chapter IV of this book.



## II

There are now to be considered several common blemishes of composition, many of which are liable to destroy the unity of a sentence. These are due not to ignorance or neglect of the laws of grammar, but to an unexpected short-circuit in the writer's line of thought. One of the commonest of this kind of accident is exemplified in the following sentence: "The farmers did not care how long their labourers worked so long as they became rich." This is an instance of the Pronoun-Facing-Both-Ways, for "they" has two possible antecedents. One attachment yields a meaning which is not in the writer's mind at all: that the labourers became rich. This serious ambiguity can be avoided by ensuring that the pronoun has only one possible antecedent: "So long as the farmers became rich they did not care how long their labourers worked." A similar ambiguity is apparent in this: "The Romans were the first to build substantial bridges, but they were far from perfect." In the next sentence, the last "his" suggests that the attendants were holding the potentate's sword, which is not what the writer intends to suggest: "All the time that he spoke his two great negroes stood behind his chair, each holding his sword." In this sentence from Pepys there is a complicated ambiguity: "The justice ordered the constable to pursue the carters and fetch them back, and make them reload the goods and carry them away, or set them in the stocks." Apart from the clumsy repetition of the pronoun, its use on the fourth occasion sets up a pronounced dubiety. It is true that almost at once one grasps the intended import of such a passage; but however brief the period is before one gets the meaning, the momentary hesitation is a sufficient measure of the failure of the sentence. The reader should not be required to waste any of his time in resolving doubts which should never have been put to him. To balance his manifold charms, Pepys is habitually slipshod with his pronouns: "One thing more is written, that two of our ships the other day appearing upon the coast of Holland they presently fired their beacons round the country to give them notice." "Them" may be themselves, the firers, in which case the operation seems superfluous; it may mean the Dutch, in which case the naïveté of such a notice to quit prevents us from accepting that meaning; or—and this is his meaning—

"them" means the inhabitants of the threatened area. The reader's attention ought not to be thus confronted with three possible alternatives.

Early writers, such as Malory, are very casual in their use of pronouns: "When Sir Galahad heard this, he thanked God and took his horse": a sentence which leaves us with the possibility of a very ungrateful transaction. Malory's charming disregard of the proper affiliation of pronouns is again evident in: "So Sir Galahad drew his sword and cut off his head." Yet Sir Galahad lived to fight again. Such a careless attachment of pronouns may have most ludicrous results: "She had her eye on the corner seat, but a man came in and sat on it." This is, however, a peculiar case, for the use of a metaphorical phrase complicates the situation. A final example: "As my room faces north, the sun shines into it only when it sets."

Too frequently a writer tries to amend such blunders by the clumsy resource of the phrases "the latter" and "the former." The following sentence is plainly ambiguous: "Almayer attacked de Beer in such a way that he was forced to kill him in self-defence." The deficiencies of the sentence may be patched up by this amendment: "Almayer attacked de Beer in such a way that the latter was forced to kill him in self-defence." But the real cure is much more radical: "Almayer attacked him in such a way that de Beer was compelled in self-defence to kill his aggressor."

However slight is the difference between what the writer says and what he means, it is sufficient to create an undesirable diversion in the reader's attention. "Every animal, like every human being, has a footprint of its own, each footprint being entirely different." In the attempt to make his meaning perfectly plain the writer has unfortunately managed to create a zoological monstrosity by suggesting that animals are equipped with some mechanical device whereby they can make an infinite series of footprints: to the considerable chagrin, no doubt, of their baffled pursuers. In this instance brevity would have been consonant with lucidity: "Every animal, like every human being, has its own distinctive footprint."

Many of these malformations can be remedied by the transposition of a word or phrase to another part of the sentence. An absorbing kind of Meccano game can be played in

this way, by taking to pieces false constructions and rebuilding them in better order. Thus :

- (1) " The dogs came out of their stuffy kennels,
- (2) where they had been all night,
- (3) with loud barks."

Transpose (1) (2) (3) to (3) (1) (2).

And :

- (1) " I hear Nixon is condemned
- (2) to be shot to death
- (3) for his cowardice
- (4) by a council of war."

Transpose to (1) (4) (2) (3).

It cannot be too often reiterated that, although the writer's *intended* meaning is not difficult to detect, such *approximate* expression is not good enough. A clumsy arrangement of sentence-parts irritates the reader, and thereby defeats the function of all prose, which is to be persuasively and continuously clear in its communication.

The best intentions may result in obscurity ; and even the desire to be brief may create complications. In an attempt to be concise Ruskin wrote : " Luxury is possible in the future—innocent and exquisite—luxury for all and by the help of all." Many years later he revised the sentence, thus : " Luxury, indeed, is possible in the future—innocent because granted to the need of all ; and exquisite because perfected by the aid of all." In thus clarifying his meaning he remedied what he called his " bad trick of putting my words in braces, like game, neck to neck, and leaving the reader to untie them."

Sometimes the only defect in a sentence may be a defect of sound ; but inasmuch as a cacophony rasps the reader it prevents his immediate absorption of the meaning of the sentence. Irritating jingles and consonantal cluckings can be avoided if the writer will take the trouble to read his work *aloud* in revision. One of the commonest cacophonies is the jingle of like endings : " By assessing your damages at one farthing, the jury are showing pretty clearly what they think of your case." The ill-sounding repetition of syllables or of words is again evident in : " A priority in mortality," and in " . . . which seemed to give a soul to those splendid donations

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to learning." Even such a scrupulous writer as Ambrose Bierce may fail to get the grit out of a sentence: "It was a dark summer night, shot through with infrequent shimmers of lightning silently firing a cloud lying low in the west and portending a storm." Badly judged alliteration may create such a mouthful of consonants as "Fifteen feet thick of not flowing but flying water." Accidental rime may prove equally unfortunate: "The ground must be freed from weed before the seed is planted"; and "Many of those who try to write prose . . ." An intentional rime, on the contrary, may very well justify itself by its onomatopoeic effect, as in Bierce's sentence: "At headlong speed these mounted madmen shot past the spot where Byring had sat . . . shouting and firing their pistols." There is a similar designed aptness in the jingle of the famous line: "The singing masons building roofs of gold." Only a bad lapse of judgment could have made Milton fail to appreciate the perfectly congruous suggestion in those chiming syllables of the clink of the masons' trowels.

Sometimes the construction of a sentence causes the asperity of sound. "What is wanted is more battleships." Here the geese have to be kicked out of the boat; and the cacophony can be eliminated only by a change of construction (for the substitution of "are" for the second "is" would make the sentence faulty in concord): "What we want is more battleships"; or, more opulently, "The imperative need is for more battleships." Wordsworth fell into a similar dilemma in the sentence: "It will easily be perceived, that the only part of this sonnet which is of any value is the *lines* printed in italics." The second of the two following versions is the one which Goldsmith actually wrote, the first is one which a less careful writer might have been content with:

"The English seem as silent as the Japanese, yet vainer than the Siamese."

"The English seem as silent as the Japanese, yet vainer than the inhabitants of Siam."

The second version is not only free from cacophony, but is more balanced in construction: it sits better by the stern.

Another kind of impediment to lucidity is the Red-Herring habit, the trick of dragging a secondary idea across the path

of the incompleting main idea. This lapse of unity originates very often in the laudable desire of the writer to compress much information into a little space: "'There is now,' Lord Birkenhead is quoted by Mr. Kenneth Lindsay in his new book, *Social Progress and Educational Waste*, as saying, 'a complete ladder from the elementary school to the University.'" A recasting of the elements of this clumsy period will make the sentence reasonably fluent: "In his new book, *Social Progress and Educational Waste*, Mr. Kenneth Lindsay quotes Lord Birkenhead as saying . . ." Incidentally, the amended version gets rid of the very unnecessary and woolly passive in the original; not "B. is quoted by L.," but "L. quotes B."

In this sentence, again, careless packing creates a series of awkward bulges and makes the import of the sentence hard to grasp: "James Elroy Flecker's paternal grandfather, who was, as it is interesting in the light of the poet's later life to record, for a short time a schoolmaster in Constantinople, and who was, in later life, a Baptist minister in England, married a lady of Huguenot descent, Elizabeth Parden." The straining agony of these congested sentence-parts, gasping at every comma, might be relieved thus: "It is interesting to note, in the light of the poet's later life, that J. E. Flecker's paternal grandfather was for a short time a schoolmaster in Constantinople, returning home afterwards to become a minister and to marry Elizabeth Parden, a lady of Huguenot descent." The long heavy-loaded sentence is apt to compel several readings before its meaning becomes manifest; and unless moulded by a practised hand tends to degenerate into an amorphous mass of words in which the meaning is clotted in mere sonority. This sentence, written by Boswell, is as dropsical and ill-featured as the famous figure it so clumsily describes: "I found that I had a very perfect idea of Johnson's figure, from the portrait of him painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds soon after he had published his dictionary, in the attitude of sitting in his easy chair in deep meditation; which was the first picture his friend did for him, which Sir Joshua very kindly presented to me, and from which an engraving has been made for this work." The safest remedy is to break up this congestion into manageable sentences: "I found I had a very perfect idea of Johnson's figure, from Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait of him painted soon after he had published his dictionary. This portrait, which depicts him

sitting in his easy chair in deep meditation, was the first picture his friend did for him; and Sir Joshua has very kindly presented it to me. An engraving has been made from it for this work." This amended version, incidentally, removes the ambiguity caused by the pronoun "he" in the original.

A sentence may be correct in construction, and yet, at a first reading, throw one off the scent of its meaning: "I record my thoughts here as throwing some light upon the construction of detective dramas, which, in my opinion, take as many hair-pin bends as they will round the corners, must debouch upon the flat." One may mistake the structure of this sentence by reading "which take as many hair-pin bends as they will"—i.e. as they care to take; and on this reading one loses a few seconds in making sense of the last five words of the sentence. Of course, it is very soon apparent that the writer means "though they take as many . . ."; but the reader ought not to be required to spend any of his time in seeking alternatives. The meaning should be immediately evident. Subjunctive constructions frequently cause such momentary ambiguity as this.

The choice of exact and appropriate words must evidently be an important determining factor of the lucidity of a sentence. In a later chapter this factor will be considered in some detail; but at this stage we may note the necessity of avoiding distracting words, words badly coined, which confuse the reader and make him falter in the quest of the writer's meaning. There is one such irritating coinage in this sentence from Carlyle: "Do the first of these; do it; the second will already have become clearer, *doabler*." At the moment we are concerned rather with the effects of bad construction than with a misuse of terms; and it should be observed that ambiguity can be caused not only by the wrong arrangement of clauses and phrases, but by the misplacement of single words. Some of these lapses are very familiar: the errant "only," for example. "I only saw him once" for "I saw him only once" implies that on other occasions the writer was aware of this comparative stranger through one of the other senses: touch or smell; and "Hot dogs—only four for sixpence" implies that the vender realizes he is profiteering. But "only" is not the only offender. The word "now" in the next sentence creates a very serious double

meaning: "Mr. Streeter, I now see, tries to make out . . ." There are two alternatives:

- (i) "I now see, what I failed to see before. . ."
- (ii) "I see that Mr. Streeter is now on a fresh tack."

Much of this kind of ambiguity would be averted if writers followed the sound practice, in English, of putting the qualification before the word which it qualifies. The failure to do this is illustrated here: ". . . a legend not known unfortunately to general English readers." Was the legend *known fortunately*? Can one know a thing fortunately or unfortunately? The phrase should be written: ". . . a legend unfortunately not known . . ." A misplaced word causes the malformation again in this sentence: "The first necessity for the naturalist is a habit of fixed attention with both eyes and mind." The writer's meaning yields itself almost at once, but only after a momentary diversion of the reader's attention which, however brief, is enough to interrupt the unity of his reading. In this instance the diversion is more amusing than irritating, for it suggests an interpretation of the sentence as a warning against one-eyed observation or *The Perils Attendant Upon the Excessive Use of Microscopes*. A very slight amendment eradicates the obscurity: the deletion of "both."

### III

The second category of impediments to lucidity comprises those errors which are due to slipshod grammar; which may be another way of saying that they are again due to faults in a train of thought. One of the most common of this variety is the error of the Unattached Phrase, the orphan element in a loosely-organized sentence. Its most familiar sub-type is the unattached or the wrongly-attached participial phrase. "Walking across Piccadilly Circus last evening, the electric night-signs scintillated with many-coloured brilliance." As the sentence stands, the only interpretation of it which is consonant with the laws of grammar is that the night-signs were perambulating across Piccadilly Circus. Even the person whose knowledge of formal grammar is a little rocky can at once see the absurdity if he will transpose the sentence-parts, putting the loose participial phrase after the subject of the

sentence. Such a slight transposition will again reveal the participial phrase adrift in this sentence: "Judged by its power, speed, and especially its dimensions, you can hardly realize that the 7 h.p. Albatross is of such modest horsepower." That abortion known as "Commercial English" too frequently indulges in these loose phrases: such as "Thanking you in anticipation, believe me . . ."; and "I hope to hear from you enclosing a cheque for this amount"; and this, from a lawyer's letter: "Having left daughters only the property was sold for the gratifying sum of £125,000, and will be divided among them." A singularly reproductive property. Here is another participial calamity: "And among other rarities, a hive of bees, and being hived in glass, you may see the bees making their honeycombs mighty pleasantly." The misalliance of the phrase here produces an interpretation which is certainly not intended: that the spectators must be hived in glass. Amend thus: ". . . and, since the bees are hived in glass, you may see them . . ."

Although the participial phrase is the commonest of these unattached varieties, there are other kinds of phrases-at-a-loose-end. "I lingered for an hour by the sea-wall watching the sunbathers and the beach-parties under the coloured canopies *all so joyously assembled*." The grammatical interpretation is that the harassed beach-attendants, whose job it is to put up the canopies, do it with joy and rapture.

These defective attachments can often be put right without recasting the whole sentence, simply by making sure that the clause is put next to the word it qualifies. "Sparkling in the moonlight I saw a forest pool" thus becomes "I saw a forest pool sparkling in the moonlight."

Half-measures will not rectify the blunder, as Ruskin's attempt in this sentence demonstrates: "Having shown this drawing to a naval officer, the naval officer observed with surprise . . . that the ships of the line had no port-holes." The repetition still leaves the offending phrase in a misalliance.

Another familiar type: "Land had become private property, and, just as we do now, it was sold, leased, or rented." The loose phrase here blocks the fair-way of the sentence and wrecks its meaning; it must be replaced by a phrase which, instead of obstructing the sense, pivots it gracefully and grammatically: "Land had become private property, and, as in modern practice, it was sold. . ."



The indignation which generates so many letters to the Press is often accompanied by this kind of grammatical confusion. "*For years past* the lack of public interest in these concerts I consider scandalous." By the rules of grammar the offending phrase must be considered as an attachment to "I consider scandalous." To make such an affiliation possible we should have to change "consider" to "have considered"; but even then we should not be expressing what was in the writer's mind. His point is not that for years past he has thought the position scandalous, but rather that the chronic public neglect of the concerts is scandalous. A reshuffling of parts will clarify the sentence: "The lack of public interest, for years past, in these concerts I consider scandalous." The wayward phrase has been attached where it belongs. However slight is the displacement of a unit of a sentence, the modification of meaning which it causes may be immense: "*As a nation* I do not for one moment think we are hypocrites." This is a very notable variant of the slogan "*L'Etat—c'est moi!*" But what the writer wanted to say was: "I do not for one moment think that, as a nation, we are hypocrites."

Almost as common a mistake as that of the misplaced phrase is that of confused constructions. Before he reaches the end of his sentence, the writer forgets what construction he embarked on, and finishes on an entirely different one: "It was to him to whom I turned in my hour of adversity." The sentence wobbles between the alternatives: "It was to him that . . ." and "He it was to whom . . ." "That his denunciation of the agreement was actuated by malice we shall presently have proof of." Here the sentence wavers—as usual, with disastrous consequences—between constructions which, similar as they are in appearance, are radically different. "We shall have proof of the fact that . . ." and "We shall have proof that . . ." The writer confuses these two versions: "The fact that his denunciation . . . we shall presently have proof of" and "That his denunciation . . . we shall presently have proof." Swift had a habit of forgetting the initial construction of his sentences: "The lanes and valleys, which I could not enter, *but only viewed them as I passed*, are from twelve to eighteen inches high." Amend by substituting "could only view" or "which I could only view" for "only viewed them." The next sentence further illustrates the habit of wandering further and further away from

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the opening form : " The story is about the life of one Frank Mildmay, telling of his boyhood, of his unhappy schooldays when he was oppressed by the masters, and finally ran away to sea where he began his adventurous career." Substitute " and finally, of his running away to sea . . . "

Even in composing a short sentence it is possible to forget how the sentence began : " His appearance is probably more familiar than any other literary man." If the second part is to stand, the first part must be altered to " He is in appearance " ; but it is simpler to readjust the second part to fit the first : merely by the addition of the possessive " s " — " than any other literary man's." Part of the fun of correction is to carry out improvements with as little disturbance as possible to the fabric of the sentence ; and this finesse of revision will, time and time again, impress upon the observant the truth that the boundary between right and wrong is frail yet unassailable.

Sometimes a construction is changed more than once in a sentence. Indeed, as soon as the writer loses control of his first construction he is all the more liable to flounder into one after another. This is from a description of a hospital scene : " No sound comes from the long couches except when someone coughs, or that of the pages of a book turned over . . . or the undertone of question and quiet answer between neighbours." Here three distinct forms are used after the governing word " except " : the " except when " construction, the " that of " construction, and a third which flouts both the others. If the third is to be in agreement with the second, we must insert " that of " before " the undertone." The simplest and most reasonable amendment is : " No sound comes . . . except a cough, the rustle of turning pages, or the undertone . . . "

An unnecessary change of subject causes complications, for it wantonly destroys the unity of the sentence, and raises difficult ambiguities : " Scotland won because their forwards found the muddy conditions more to their liking than they were to the Welshmen." The introduction of " they " ruptures the sentence by introducing the clumsy passive form, and at the same time causes a waste of words. For the last five words of the sentence substitute : " the Welshmen did." The desire to be pithy must not tempt the corrector to write " the Welshmen " for the last five words of the original ; for this alteration would imply that the Scots liked the p. . . are

than they liked their opponents : a suggestion which is not in the original.

This habit of changing the subject of the sentence, a trick so disruptive of unity, proceeds from sheer untidiness of mind. For the tendency to forget, especially during the course of a long sentence, the kind of construction with which it was launched, there is some excuse ; but this purposeless and precipitate change of subject simply betokens a slovenly writer. Compare these versions :

(1) " The fruit of the pomegranate was not only eaten fresh, but a syrup was distilled from it."

and

(2) " The fruit of the pomegranate was not only eaten fresh, but was distilled into a syrup."

The first, with its change of subject and its lapse in construction, appears actually more difficult to commit than to avoid ; only an incorrigible slattern could write it.

What is apparently a minor change of construction may prove to have major consequences : " For me, there is no poem in the whole language which has more power to lift one on to that strange and lonely plain, ' where nothing is but what is not.' " In his first two words the writer specifically declares that he is considering a particular case—" For me "—and not the general effect of a certain poem ; but he proceeds immediately to relapse into the generalized " one." He must be content to say " There is no poem . . . which has more power to lift me. . . ."

Doubtful Relatives are another familiar source of confusion in unpractised writing. " He put this engine to our ears, which made an incessant noise like that of a waterfall." This is presumably an instance of that rare phenomenon, the Musical Ear. The presence of the comma, it is true, minimizes the danger of ambiguity, but it certainly does not eradicate it. Sound prose should not depend upon punctuation to cover up faults of construction. The only valid method of avoiding these unconscious absurdities is to be certain that the relative clause is securely soldered to the word it qualifies : " He put to our ears this engine, which . . ." or, " This engine, which made an incessant noise . . . he put to our ears." In the following example, a most unfortunate ambiguity develops

because the relative construction after "which" appears to govern also the words "ceased to powder his hair": "Poole was convinced that all the powers on earth could not destroy 'the glowing spirit of liberty,' which, he thanked God, pervaded the earth, ceased to powder his hair, read and appreciated Paine's *Rights of Man*, and, practical in everything, arranged to find employment as an ordinary workman in a London tan-yard." The loose, rapid form of the sentence is perfectly appropriate, for it gives a cumulative quality which the subject-matter demands; but the relative clause creates sad mischief. If the cumulative structure is to be preserved, the wedge of words which destroys its unity must be taken out: "which, he thanked God, pervaded the earth." This means the sacrifice of an effective parenthesis ("he thanked God"); but the rest of the excision can well be spared, for its import is already implicit in the sentence. Apart from these considerations, there is no doubt that the deletion removes a clause which causes both an impediment to the flow of the sentence and an ambiguity in its meaning.

Another common accident in the handling of relative clauses must be noted. In this sentence the relative construction, being preceded by "and" wrongly assumes that a relative clause has already appeared in the sentence: "The statement was incorrect, as anyone acquainted with American engines, and who has seen the engines in question, will recognize." The deletion of "and" rectifies the error. The old-fashioned rule: Never use "and which" unless "which" has already occurred is evidently not sufficiently discriminating, for it would wrongly condemn such an accurate sentence as the one from page 80 of this book, in which both defining clauses perform the same function:

"The chief problem of prose rhythm is to devise such an ebb and flow of sound as will bear on its surface the rise and fall of the signification of the sentence, and which will be undiverted in its progress by any backwash of sound."

Here, though one clause is introduced by "as" and the other by "which," they are alike in kind; and the "and which" is therefore perfectly valid. *The King's English* lays down the sound principle: "And or but which should be used to complete such expressions, and such only, as perform the same function."

A further troublesome affliction of unskilful composition is Ellipsis: a name which sounds appropriate to a malady. This is the truncation of a form of construction, proceeding from the meritorious desire to be brief. In the effort to be concise the writer omits some essential word or phrase, and so leaves the flank of the sentence open to some ambiguity. Thus this sentence leaves one in complete doubt about its meaning: "I like white rabbits much less than other boys." Less than I like other boys? or less than other boys like white rabbits? Even when the meaning is not so entirely obscured, the jamming of two constructions is sufficiently evident as to be distracting to the reader: "In consequence of these oppressive duties our export trade had and would decline." Expansion is here the only remedy: "... had declined, and would continue to decline." In attempting to link up two constructions a clumsy pointsman may foul the track, so that one of the constructions is telescoped by the other. In this sentence, from a notice announcing the opening of a tailor's shop, the collision is disastrous to the second: "A West-end cutter has been transferred to the new branch and the standard of excellence maintained." The boast is premature; and the tailor must insert a patch in the sentence: "will be" before "maintained."

There remain to be mentioned two other liabilities which the writer must guard against. One is the possibility of False Concords. A lack of agreement between subject and predicate generally arises from the interposition between them of a noun in a different number from that of the subject; and care must be taken to ensure agreement between the verb and its *actual* subject—not extensions of that subject. The mistake is evident in this sentence: "The position of the enemy's guns were a constant menace to the defenders." The other danger is from the possible confusion of negatives. Like so many other blunders, this one is often occasioned by a laudable intention: in this instance a desire to be emphatic. Here, for example, the excellent attempt to be emphatic nullifies the meaning: "And Sir Launcelot said, 'Never was I discomfited in no quarrel.'" And, again: "No one would for a moment deny that the operation of the new scales of Post Office pay will not press hardly upon certain grades." Stevenson commits the same fault in this sentence: "Let them agree to differ; for who knows but what agreeing to

differ may not be a form of agreement." In the last two examples, the deletion of "not" remedies the defect.

## IV

Nothing has been said in this chapter about mistakes of punctuation, for the sufficient reason that those who read this book are expected to be cognizant with its few simple rules. But here we may emphasize an important principle which has been indicated earlier in the section: that the writer should never rely simply upon stops to avoid ambiguities. If he finds it necessary to juggle with commas so as to clarify a sentence, he must conclude that his sentence is radically deformed; and, if he is a conscientious writer, he will promptly remodel it. Punctuation is a crutch only; and a really well-built sentence might dispense with it entirely. It is a convenience which enables people to write easily and to read quickly; and it might be to the benefit of both reader and writer if they had to accustom themselves to getting along without it. The composition of legal documents has at least this one virtue, that it puts not its trust in commas. The following example, a little wearisome, perhaps, and for other reasons not a model of serviceable prose, will prove, on slow reading, perfectly lucid in meaning.

"We do hereby declare that in the event of the Corporation exercising the power hereinbefore contained of borrowing or raising money upon the security of or otherwise charging all or any part of its property or rights (otherwise than for the purpose of obtaining temporary Banking accommodation and facilities) it shall set aside yearly out of its revenue and invest in Trustee securities and accumulate as a sinking fund which shall be applied towards the repayment of such moneys and redemption of such securities such sums as in the opinion of the Auditors of the Corporation will be sufficient after bringing into account the estimated value for purposes of redemption of any assets acquired or to be acquired or additions or improvements made or to be made by means of the money so borrowed or raised as aforesaid to provide for the repayment of any sums so borrowed or raised by the Corporation otherwise than as aforesaid and the redemption of any securities for sums so borrowed raised or secured by the Corporation prior to the expiration of the term of this Our Charter or any extension thereof."

The Elizabethans set two examples which more pedantic

generations have forsaken: of free spelling, and of free punctuation. Our attempt to standardize spelling has had results which make our language either the laughing-stock or the despair of intelligent foreigners. There are signs, however, that our standardized punctuation may ultimately be abandoned. There are many notable writers of to-day who have demonstrated that if prose is physiologically sound it can be read without the aid of stops. Mr. James Joyce has written fifty pages of perfectly transparent prose without a stop from beginning to end. And, indeed, if unpunctuated prose were actually to make people read more slowly it would be performing an excellent service to a generation which is inclined to bolt its reading. A little more patience would make the experimental prose of the modern revolutionaries seem less mirth-provoking than it apparently is to those who, too lazy or too tired to read, have developed the habit of skimming books. But the break with convention which is being touched upon here is not an extreme one; it is simply the recognition by many excellent contemporary prosemen that good writing needs no artificial stopping. In particular, the silly fetish of quotation-marks is being more and more widely defied. One of those computing geniuses who fill up the columns of the lighter weeklies with estimates of the number of tons of rust annually scraped off the Tay Bridge might well calculate the saving of expenditure which would result from the abolition of quotes in all printed work. Formidable statistics might convince those arbiters of national policy whom common sense invariably fails to impress. It may be worth pointing out that the rejection of quotes (as a step towards the abolition of punctuation altogether) is not another manifestation of the degeneracy of these naughty times, and that the practice of such modern masters as Mr. George Moore was anticipated by the editors of the Authorized Version.

## v

Such defects of composition as those considered in this chapter are so common that their prevalence in print might appear to indicate that they do not seriously obscure meaning. That may be true; for there is a kinship between slipshod readers and slipshod writers which enables them to understand each other. But the aim of the writer should be to write for

an intelligent and susceptible audience. Such errors as those we have here examined are decidedly a source of irritation to a literate reader, and, therefore, an impediment to lucid communication. Most of these lapses are due to hasty and unconsidered composition, and can be avoided by the persistent application of two principles : The first, to write circumspectly, to tread as delicately as Agag, and so to avoid the treacherous mud-holes which lie all about the narrow path of direct expression ; never to move a step until you see firm ground for your meaning. The second, to revise with unsparing patience ; and, when a doubt remains, to read aloud the passage under suspicion. The ear can detect faults which the eye may fail to perceive.



## CHAPTER IV

### VARIETY

#### I

A PIECE of prose may be perfectly free from any of the blemishes enumerated in the last chapter, and yet prove dull and dispirited reading. One is often vaguely conscious that a passage of prose lacks interest, attractiveness, readableness, and yet the cause of this absence of tone may easily elude detection. An analysis based on the points to be raised in the present chapter will, however, reveal that the radical trouble is lack of variety. The sentences are of a uniform length or of a standardized pattern; or the diction is of one unvaried brand—commonly the Latinized polysyllabic.

Some qualities of prose are difficult to attain, some are impossible to cultivate; but the quality of variety is one that can be achieved by any writer who will in patient revision vary the sentence-forms and sentence-lengths which he *habitually* uses; and modify his tendency to employ one kind of vocabulary. Perfection in prose does not consist of uniformity and standardization, but of a constant modulation and plasticity of phrase and sentence. However admirable in a single extract Carlyle's prose may be, in bulk it proves tedious reading: we weary of meeting the same habitual turn of phrase, the same mannerisms, the same peculiar sentence-form. Only the well-varied prose style can survive the test of prolonged reading.

Variety of sentence-structure is the most essential factor in the attainment of a flexible style. The most familiar classification of sentence-types is the threefold one, into simple, compound, and complex. The simple sentence is the most elementary form, consisting of a single detached unit of expression: "The stars will shine. The moon will rise

again. But I shall not see them." The compound structure, by linking together a series of simple sentences, makes a more fluent period. The complex formation gives a scope for organization which neither of the other forms permits. It manoeuvres the units of expression into an organic form; so that the sentence develops from one root idea to which the other ideas are both subsequent and subsidiary. The simple sentence is self-sufficient; the components of a compound sentence are comparatively independent of each other: they are a loose federation of ideas. But a complex sentence is an absolute monarchy in which a dominant central idea is amplified and supplemented by one or more subsidiary clauses.

The expression of even the simplest idea offers several alternatives:

(1) *Simple form*: "I put on my hat. I went down the lane." And—"We made further inquiries. We arrested the man."

(2) *Compound form*: "I put on my hat and went down the lane." And—"We made further inquiries and arrested the man."

(3) *Complex form*: "When I had put on my hat, I went down the lane." And—"Having made further inquiries we arrested the man." Or—"When we had made further inquiries, we arrested the man."

This distinction between the three basic sentence-forms is not for a moment to be regarded as discriminating against the simple and the compound forms. They are as necessary and as desirable as the more elaborate complex form; they have functions which the complex cannot fulfil; and part of a writer's skill lies in his knowing when to use each of the three forms. The simple sentence, for example, is most effective for rapid, dramatic narrative. In this short description of a storm at sea from Mr. Masfield's *A Tarpaulin Muster*, the predominant simple sentences are most strikingly appropriate to the tenseness of the subject-matter:

"It came roaring past with a fervour and a fury which struck me breathless. I could only look aloft to the yard I was bound for and heave my panting body up the rigging. And there was

the mizen-royal. There was the sail I had come to furl. And a wonder of a sight it was. It was blowing and bellying in the wind, and leaping around 'like a drunken colt,' and flying over the yard, and thrashing and flogging. It was roaring like a bull with its slatting and thrashing. The royal mast was bending to the strain of it. To my eyes it was buckling like a piece of whalebone. I lay out on the yard, and the sail hit me in the face and knocked my cap away. It beat me and banged me, and blew from my hands. The wind pinned me flat against the yard, and seemed to be blowing all my clothes to shreds. I felt like a king, like an emperor. I shouted aloud with the joy of that 'rastle' with the sail. Forward of me was the main mast, with another lad, fighting another royal; and beyond him was yet another, whose sail seemed tied in knots. Below me was the ship, a leaping mad thing, with little silly figures, all heads and shoulders, pulling silly strings along the deck. There was the sea, sheer under me, and it looked grey and grim, and streaked with the white of our smother."

Macaulay, so uncommonly well-practised in all the devices of prose, employs the simple sentence in the next example to indicate the rapid vacillations of that weathercock Surajah Dowlah: "He ordered his army to march against the English. He countermanded his orders. He tore up Clive's letters. He then sent answers in the most florid language of compliment. He ordered Watts (the negotiator) out of his presence, and threatened to impale him. He again sent for Watts, and begged pardon for the insult." Macaulay also illustrates the effectiveness of the simple sentence in depicting a crisis: as in his account of the Trial of the Seven Bishops. The simple sentence, then, is effective for certain specific purposes. But in the next extract the subject-matter does not demand the pithy dramatic form of the simple sentence; and the result of its use here is to disintegrate the impression which the writer is trying to give:

"There are many interesting and beautiful bridges throughout the world. I think that the most beautiful are the handsome, carven structures which cross the Venetian canals. These are adorned with wonderful works of art of every description. They are sculptured and painted magnificently. For rhythm and design they are unparalleled in any other Italian town. I think that the only respect in which these bridges can be excelled is in efficiency."

The compound form, which also has justifiable uses, commends itself to hasty and disorganized minds. It enables a loose thinker to thread his ideas hastily together without any graduation or emphasis. It is particularly liable to disunity, as the examples given in the last chapter evidenced; for so easy is the process of linking simple sentences together that the writer is tempted to stretch out his line to the crack of doom, each extra link carrying the sentence farther and farther away from the idea which initiated it. Adolescent and illiterate writing favour the compound form; and much early English prose, such as Malory's and Bunyan's is of this amorphous kind. The admissible use of the compound form is as an auxiliary to and variant of the simple for rapid narrative composition. It covers the ground with an excellent turn of speed: "The next morning he rose before daylight, prayed to God, lighted the stove and prepared the cabbage soup and buckwheat gruel, filled the samovar and set it to boil, put on his apron, and sat down at the window to work."

One other function of the simple form should be mentioned. It frequently plays the part of pilot fish to the big complex form. Lamb<sup>1</sup> and Macaulay, for instance, follow the excellent practice of beginning (or closing) a paragraph with a simple sentence which summarizes the content of the series of complex sentences. Although he has a natural preference for the long sonorous complex form, no one realized more clearly than Lamb that a frequent interposition of simple sentences is essential. Such a mixture prevents prose from becoming glutinous and stodgy: an ill-mixed Christmas pudding, full of rich ingredients, but highly indigestible.

The complex sentence demands more organization than the other forms. In the first place it necessitates the emphasis of one of its component clauses at the expense of the others; and thus requires that the writer shall in his own mind know which of his ideas is dominant and which is subsidiary. If, for example, we are to weave these two simple sentences into a complex, we are faced with the necessity of decision between two differently stressed meanings: "The stranger stopped me. He was wearing a dark cloak." The alternatives are:

<sup>1</sup> See Lamb's *Witches*: "I have sometimes thought . . . laws of that country."

(1) "The stranger, who stopped me, was wearing a dark cloak."

(2) "The stranger, who was wearing a dark cloak, stopped me."

This salient characteristic of the complex form constantly asserts itself; and in so far as this form allows more light and shade of emphasis and meaning than the others, it is to that extent the most generally serviceable type. Even in its shortest kind, as the above example demonstrates, it requires a certain degree of organization; and when the complex sentence is of extended length it becomes a very considerable test of one's power to control a long train of thought. In this light the student may reconsider the examples given in the preceding chapter of long and intricate complex-forms.

## II

The manœuvring of the clauses of a complex sentence affords wide scope for variety. Two principal categories of the complex form may first be considered, one of which is subdivisible into many further varieties. These two main types are the Loose and the Suspended (or Periodic) forms.

In speech most people are not in the habit of organizing their sentences; and the commonest kind of oral expression is this: "I'd buy a cottage on the Downs and keep bees and fowls and lead the simple life if I had the money." That is to say, we deliver the main idea first, and then attach qualifying clauses and phrases to it. Because of this common habit most conversation in English resembles a kite badly balanced and sagging beneath the weight of its tail. This type of sentence is called *loose* because its construction is of the freest, most casual kind. Its opposite would take this form: "If I had the money, I'd buy a cottage . . ."; and the difference between the two is that the second—which is suggestively called the *suspended* form—retards the main idea as long as possible. Very often this reversal heightens the reader's interest. "If I had the money" arouses curiosity in what is to come; but in the loose form this clause shrinks almost to negligibility. It creeps in at the end of the sentence with its tail between its legs.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the suspended

is invariably better than the loose form. Nothing is more tedious than a string of elaborately-turned suspended sentences; and evidently it is true that suspense can be maintained to the point of exasperation, and, finally, of boredom. Each of the two forms has its merits and its uses; and a good style consists of a judicious blend of both. One of the lessons which the tyro has to learn is to discriminate between those occasions which demand the withholding of the main clause and those when it is most fitly displayed at the outset of the sentence. Deliberate revision will give the writer an opportunity of selecting here and there a sentence which may more profitably be recast in the alternative style. The habitual use of either form exclusively is definitely bad style.

In a general sense it may be said that the loose and suspended types are each fitted to a distinct kind of subject-matter. The plastic loose form is indicated for any kind of prose which needs quick movement, for narrative or for rapid description. The suspended form is best adapted to a didactic subject-matter, where the very rigidity of the sentence-form acts as a close scaffolding to an involved argument.

*Loose* is sometimes synonymous with slipshod. The expression of the main idea is completed early in a long loose sentence; yet the period rambles on, drifting further and further away from the control of the main clause. There is always a very real danger that the loose construction may degenerate into an anti-climax. Once the dominant idea has been set out, the sentence tends to lose all sense of obligation, and to dissipate itself in irrelevance and disunity. The periodic sentence, on the contrary, suspending the expression of its main idea as long as it dare, prevents the writer from introducing extraneous matter into the sentence; the main clause hovers in his mind waiting for the best opportunity of asserting its dominance over what has gone before. The continual presence of this important clause tends to keep the writer constantly aware that nothing must go into the sentence which cannot be organically controlled by the culminating main clause. Here is a typical sample from Scott of the bedraggled loose form:

"A few aged and scattered yew trees, of great size, still vindicated for the beautiful green hill the name attached to

it. But a far greater number had fallen a sacrifice to the general demand for bowstaves in that warlike age, the bow being a weapon much used by the mountaineers, though those which they employed, as well as their arrows, were, in shape and form, and especially in efficacy, far inferior to the archery of merry England."

Scott's habitual haste of composition, and the conditions which prevented careful revision of his work, will account not only for the slack construction of this passage, but also for the cacophonous jingles of the piece: "*Bowstaves in that warlike age;*" "*though those . . . arrows;*" "*archery . . . merry.*"

This is one type of loose sentence. On the other hand, the loose form may be perfectly apt and effective. In the next sentence (by Mr. Norman Douglas) the subsidiary matter, in a manner very appropriate to the metaphor employed, is loosely attached to the main clause; the sinuosity of the sentence parallels the image which it evokes:

"A gorgeous procession took place about midday. It wound out of the chapel like a many-coloured serpent, writhed through the intricacies of the pathway, and then unrolled itself freely, in splendid convolutions, about the sunlit meadow, saluted by the crash of mortars, bursts of military music from the band, chanting priests and women, and all the bagpipes congregated in a mass, each playing his own favourite tune."

In this sentence, as in the last one, the secondary matter is so essentially an extension of the main idea, and at the same time so sympathetic to the rhythm of the entire sentence that the unity of the whole is in no way impaired by the loose form: "When all is done, human life is, at the greatest and the best, but like a froward child, that must be played with and humoured a little to keep it quiet till it falls asleep, and then the care is over." That kind of loose sentence is unimpeachable.

The possibilities of variety within the suspended sentence will be appreciated if we consider that the sentence is always governed by one directing idea. This may be variously positioned within the sentence: hence a large variety of possible forms of structure. In this sentence, the suspension is of comparatively short duration: "From the vast invisible

ocean of moonlight overhead fell, here and there, a slender, broken stream that seemed to splash against the intercepting branches and trickle to earth, forming small white pools among the clumps of laurel." In the more elaborate varieties the suspension is further delayed; and this intricacy of pattern makes possible that fine harmony of sense and sound which distinguishes eighteenth-century prose. The first and last parts of the sentence are the introduction and the qualification respectively of the main idea. These relieve the strain on the main pillar; and at the same time they mark the rhythmic take-off and the dying fall of its cadence. This sentence of Goldsmith's rises by a stately progression to a climax which occurs about the middle of the period, and falls away along a gentle declivity to its close; and the crest of the wave of rhythm coincides with the climax of the idea:

"While his youth countenances the levity of his conduct, he may thus earn a precarious subsistence; but when age comes on, the gravity of which is incompatible with buffoonery, *then will he find himself forsaken by all*; condemned, in the decline of life, to hang upon some rich family whom he once despised, there to undergo all the ingenuity of studied contempt, to be employed only as a spy upon the servants, or a bugbear to frighten children into duty."

In the next example from Motley, the climax is longer delayed:

"Ambitious but trivial, enterprising but cowardly, an intriguer and a dupe, without religious convictions or political principles, save that he was willing to accept any creed or any system which might advance his own schemes, *he was the most unfit protector* for a people who, whether wrong or right, were at least in earnest, and who were accustomed to regard truth as one of the virtues."

In this sentence the meaning is not fully disclosed until the very end of the sentence is reached: "That he should have wasted some years in ignorance of what alone was really important, that he may have entertained the thought of other women with any show of complacency, is a burthen almost too heavy for his self-respect." And similarly: "That Johnson's introduction into Mr. Thrall's family, which contributed so much to the happiness of his life, was owing to her desire for his conversation, is a very probable



and the general, supposition." In the following sentence, which happens to be in verse, the accumulation of meaning is held up to the very last word: "Softly along the road of evening, In a twilight dim with rose, Wrinkled with age, and drenched with dew, Old Nod, the shepherd, goes." It is by the use of the suspended form that Lamb, in his essay on *Roast Pig*, achieves the racy climax of the passage chronicling the trail of Ho-Ti and Bo-bo ("He handled it, and they all handled it . . . simultaneous verdict of Not Guilty").

This trick of holding the reader in suspense was one of Lamb's many delightful prose antics; but the charm of the following passage does not obliterate the evident fact that the suspension hopelessly destroys the unity of the sentence: which is a further reminder that Lamb is to be enjoyed but not imitated:

"When my friend commences upon one of those solemn anthems, which peradventure struck upon my heedless ear, rambling in the side aisles of the dim Abbey, some five-and-thirty years since, waking a new sense, and putting a soul of old religion into my young apprehension—(whether to be *that*, in which the Psalmist, weary of the persecutions of bad men, wisheth to himself dove's wings—or that other which, with a like measure of sobriety and pathos, inquireth by what means the young man shall best cleanse his mind)—a holy calm pervadeth me."

A third, and much less important, variant, may be from time to time sparingly employed: the parallel construction. This is a type which recommended itself to the rather formal prose tastes of the eighteenth century. Used judiciously it is a very powerful medium for developing a series of complementary or contradictory ideas; but outside this limited use it is too rigid a form to be commendable. Such a pithy writer as Bacon found it well-suited to an epigrammatic turn of mind: "Crafty men condemn studies; simple men admire them; and wise men use them. . . . Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Goldsmith and Macaulay were both alive to the peculiar merits of the balanced form; and Lamb, in his opening of the essay on *A Quakers' Meeting*

weaves a delightful pattern of parallels and opposites: "Reader, would'st thou know what true peace and quiet mean; would'st thou find a refuge from the noises and clamours of the multitude; would'st thou enjoy at once solitude and society; would'st thou possess the depth of thine own spirit in stillness, without being shut out from the consolatory faces of thy species; would'st thou be alone and yet accompanied; solitary, yet not desolate; singular, yet not without some to keep thee in countenance; a unit in aggregate; a simple in composite:—come with me into a Quakers' Meeting." The famous lines from Raleigh combine balance and antithesis in a very effective symmetrical pattern: "O eloquent, just and mighty Death! Whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised." The passage beginning "Many a more fruitful coast or isle . . ." quoted for another purpose on page 96 may be studied as another example of well-contrived parallels.

### III

A common defect of unskilled prose is that caused by a writer's failure to vary the type of subsidiary clause within a complex sentence: thus—"We took a tram to the Baker's Arms, *where* we boarded a bus and rode to Southampton Row. In Holborn we met my father at a restaurant *where* we had a hearty lunch; and after this, he took us to The British Museum *where* he left us." Here we may repeat that there is a difference between repetition which is the product of clumsiness or carelessness, and repetition which is deliberate and purposive. By retaining a given form of clause construction Goldsmith in this sentence achieves an excellent cumulative effect:

"You must not, however, imagine that they who compile these papers have any actual knowledge of the politics, or the government, of a state: they only collect their materials from the oracle of some coffee-house, which oracle has himself gathered them, the night before, from a beau at a gaming table, who has pillaged his knowledge from a great man's porter, who has had his information from the great man's gentleman, who has invented the whole story for his own amusement, the night preceding."

Another familiar symptom of weak prose is the habit of over-indulgence in the participial phrase. There are clichés of form as well as clichés of phrase; and this particular one is commonly worked to death by the unskilful. The participial phrase is emphatically a thorough nuisance. As we saw in the previous chapter it is often a snare to lucidity; and, apart from that, it is a construction which, more than most repetitions, soon becomes intolerably tedious to the reader. It is organically clumsy; and beginners in the craft of writing, like novices in the other arts and in sport, seem to gravitate towards the clumsy method. The recurrence in immature prose of this baneful participial form is pathetic; the timid apprentice clings to it as a nervous bather clutches the safety rope instead of plunging into deeper and safer water: thus—“Having reached the age of twenty, Borrow went to London, and being of a shy disposition he looked up none of those to whom he had letters of credit. But one day, going down Cheapside, he encountered Mr. Taylor, who, being a hearty and generous man, at once took him home.”

So far, it is evident that there is considerable scope for variety in the available sentence-forms: simple, compound, complex; loose, suspended, and balanced. But, beyond this range of types, there are a number of devices for ringing the changes within a sentence, no matter what its type may be.

## IV

The device called Inversion can be a powerful implement in moulding an expressive style; but, like other delicate instruments, it may do considerable damage in the hands of a bungler. It is first of all essential to distinguish the two functions of inversion, the second of which is much more important than the first:

- (1) as a means of stressing one part of a sentence; and
- (2) as a mode of giving variety to sentences which are too much of a pattern.

The delusion is prevalent that inversion is simply a device for giving emphasis to a unit of the sentence; whereas in fact it is far more frequently a device of relief and variation. This misconception is established on the disputable assumption that the beginning of a sentence is invariably more important

than its end ; and that, therefore, just as an advertiser tries to get his bright copy printed on the front page, so we should assign to the opening of a sentence whatever idea we wish to emphasize to the reader. The assumption is the product of nothing more material than an optical illusion : that what we see first endures longest. On what principle can it be maintained that the first part of such a sentence as this is more important than the last : " From the humble academy kept by the old soldier the boy was removed in his ninth year " ? And again, consider this sentence : " In tumult he lived, in shame he fell, in the cloister he died." In each of the three links the second part impinges on the attention as much as the first part ; and the contrast between *lived—fell—died* is as pronounced as that between *tumult—shame—cloister*. The beginning of a sentence is not necessarily more prominent than its end, or even than its middle ; the chief part of a sentence is the place where its government resides, that is, the position occupied by its main clause. The mere stations in the sequence of words carry no priority of importance. The truth is that if we invert a sentence, by putting its tail where its head would normally be, we create a form, which, because it is exceptional, strikes with a greater impact than usual upon the reader's attention. The slightest vagary of dress—the wearing of a top hat and sandals, for example—will immediately attract the curious eyes of a busy street ; and, similarly, the least variation of the normal order of words within a sentence will evoke an unusual degree of attention to its meaning. By transposing the head and the tail of a sentence one may therefore emphasize its import : a proposition which is fundamentally different from the one which maintains that the front part of a sentence is the cynosure of interest. In this sentence, for instance, it is by the removal of the most significant part to the *end* of the sentence that it is emphasized : " It is not, in the best cricles, considered proper to knock at doors and run away." And in this extract from *The Doctor's Dilemma* the shifting *backwards* of an adjective which normally would precede the noun gives that adjective additional potency : " I believe in Michael Angelo, Velasquez, and Rembrandt ; in the might of design, the mystery of colour, the redemption of all things by Beauty everlasting . . . "

The familiar " Sweet are the uses of adversity " carries as much emphasis in its last word as in its first : both words

have become equally important because of the inversion of the usual order : " The uses of adversity are sweet." Because "sweet" has undergone a completer transposition than "adversity," it may perhaps carry a greater stress—but not because it is the first word of the sentence. And again here, and for the same reason, the last word carries as much significance as the first : " Treeless they are, the Siren rocks, but not flowerless." When Stevenson writes : " Pitiful is the case of the blind, who cannot read the face ; pitiful that of the deaf, who cannot follow the changes of the voice "—it is the change from the normal order which throws the single word " pitiful " into such strong relief. Just as often as inversion serves as a mode of emphasis, however, it functions simply as a mode of variety. In this sentence, for example, no *emphasis* is procured by the first version ; but it provides a very satisfying alternative to the more obvious construction of the second version :

(1) " Of the almond tree they say that if you take a sprig of it in your wallet, misfortune will never attend you." —

(2) " They say of the almond tree . . . "

The suspended form of the next sentence, although it transposes the subsidiary clause to the front of the sentence, certainly throws the emphasis upon the later main clause : " Few though they were in number, the garrison put up a gallant defence."

One of the most profitable processes of revision consists of disintegrating and reassembling the parts of a sentence. The transference of a phrase or clause, often even of a word, will frequently not only clarify the meaning of a sentence, but will give it a freshness of tone and a fluency of rhythm which are absent from the original draft. This kind of inversion shakes a sentence out of its customary sluggish habit of construction ; and by breaking up old enfeebled alliances of words and clichés of form creates an opportunity for words to effect new and more vigorous affiliations.

The transference of a single word can enliven an entire sentence. The adverb is one of the most mobile units of a sentence ; and by manœuvring it into a strategical position, one can give the sentence a most decisive aspect : " Then he searched for the cat which *yesterday* he had forgotten in his happy bewilderment, and carried *heedfully* the dark unlovely beast home in his arms." Experiment will show that these

two adverbs are perfectly positioned. By changing the accustomed position of an adverb Bunyan not only endows a sentence with the quality of freshness, but casts a spotlight upon the word which has been moved from its normal position : " But glorious it was to see how the open region was filled with horses and chariots, with trumpeters and pipers, with singers and players on stringed instruments." The last word of the following sentence stands out with portentous significance by being transferred from its conventional position : " Outside the wall, at the part of the grounds farthest from the public road, were a horse and a light wagon, waiting." Max Beer-bohm brings off a brilliant effect of wit by the unexpected separation of a single adjective from its noun in this sentence : " Crack though the regiment was . . . young Mr. Brummell could not bear to see all his brother officers in clothes exactly like his own."

The transformation of an occasional loose sentence into the suspended type is evidently a variation which inversion can accomplish. Such a sentence as this one can be taken to pieces and remodelled several times until the ideal order is attained :

- (1) " At the hour of dusk
- (2) the sound of music came floating over the lake
- (3) to the captive king."

Of this form we may enumerate the following variants : (3) (2) (1) ; (2) (3) (1) ; (3) (1) (2) ; (2) (1) (3) ; (1) (3) (2).

Here is another example of what can be done in this Meccano game of transposing the parts of a sentence :

*Original form :*

- (1) " Hanging from the dark branch of a tree,
- (2) like a necklace of pearls,
- (3) were some dew-drops
- (4) sparkling in the brilliant sunshine."

*Variations :* (4) (3) (1) (2) ; (1) (3) (2) (4) ; (4) (3) (2) (1) ; (2) (3) (1) (4). By splitting up unit (3) into two parts : " were " and " some dew-drops," at least three more variants may be produced : e.g. " Some dew-drops, like a necklace of pearls, were hanging from the dark branch of a tree, sparkling in the brilliant sunshine."

Very often it will be found in revision that a sentence has a loose end which is interfering with both the unity and the rhythm. By clipping this off and neatly inserting it elsewhere, the sentence may be improved in both respects. This defect is manifest here: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties." That last phrase would fit better almost anywhere else in the sentence; the two best recasts being:

- (1) "Above all liberties, give me . . .";
- (2) "Give me the liberty, above all liberties . . ."

Sometimes a quite justifiable use of inversion may create undesirable complications: "Enthusiastic as has been the reception in England of this remarkable novel, *Jew Suss*, it is not possible to feel that it has been overpraised." The first few words of the sentence are badly jammed by the cacophony, "Enthusiastic as has been." A less complete inversion would remedy this: "Enthusiastic as the reception in England has been of this . . ."

Inversion has two legitimate functions: that of emphasis, and that of relief or variation. But when these are abused the device degenerates into an irritating mannerism. Inversion is for occasional, not for constant, use; moreover, it is definitely for use and not for adornment. If it fails to emphasize a point, or to relieve monotony of construction, or to give grace and fluency to a cadence—it loses all justification. The inversion in the following example is nothing but an affectation: "Eminently suitable for beginners this book may claim to be. Complete in every detail is its analysis of the outline of economic theory; and competent and fluent is its manner of exposition." Stevenson, writing of the street lamps of the seventeenth century, falls into the same foppishness: "Rudely puffed the winds of heaven; roguishly clomb up the all-destructive urchin;" Mr. H. G. Wells occasionally lapses into it: "Came the day when I was to leave the suburban shop for ever." In a narrative of personal adventure an author risks the accusation of insincerity by adopting this same artificial manner: "Six long weeks we fought the weather off Cape Horn; hungry and cold we struggled with the ship, never giving an inch. Icebergs and gales we met and fought." The first time, the inversion is effective; but its continued and indiscriminating use defeats its purpose. The

prose-de-luxe of Mr. Michael Arlen reeks of this foppishness: "Shivering a little she was . . . sobbing a little she was now against my shoulder."

A series of consecutive inversions is hardly ever warrantable: "Furiously they wrestled with beams and twisted iron-work. Desperately they strove to release the imprisoned miner from the mass of wreckage which pinned him down. Fainter became his moans as he slowly relapsed into unconsciousness; and finally they realized that there was no longer any need to hurry." Such sustained inversion fails because it becomes monotonous; and what began as a reasonable variation of the usual form falls into the very defect it set out to remedy. If all the adverbs of this sentence are to be retained, then, some of them at least might be restored to their normal positions, so giving point to those which are left inverted.

This paragraph of Ruskin's, on the Merchant's Trade, is a model of ease and flexibility: its constructions are well-varied, and there is well-contrived inversion in it. The writing succeeds because its variation of usual forms is moderate and well-judged:

"Not less is the respect we pay to the lawyer and physician, founded ultimately on their self-sacrifice. Whatever the learning or acuteness of a great lawyer, our chief respect for him depends on our belief that, set in the judge's seat, he will strive to judge justly, come of it what may. Could we suppose that he would take bribes, and use his acuteness and legal knowledge to give plausibility to iniquitous decisions, no degree of intellect would win for him our respect. Nothing will win it, short of our tacit conviction, that in all important acts of life justice is first with him; his own interest second."

Motley's prose will provide many examples of a similarly restrained use of inversion.

## V

Another method of giving the quality of variety to prose is by blending long sentences and short ones. What has already been said of the advantage of mixing simple sentences with complex ones applies generally to this related consideration of sentence-length, although, of course, a short sentence needs a simple sentence. The particular advantages of the are: that it tends to be more unified and lucid than the involved long sentence, that it can handle narrative



more rapidly and directly ; that it can, in the impressionist manner, quickly sketch a scene or a character. The long sentence, although it demands more wary writing, allows greater subtlety of expression than the other type ; it gives light and shade, whereas the short sentence gives only a line drawing. Historians and chroniclers prefer the short : as witness the prose of Defoe, Macaulay, Froude, Thackeray, and Mr. G. M. Trevelyan. The didactic writers, on the other hand—those who desire to weave intricate patterns of thought, like Johnson, Burke, Carlyle, and Pater, and the rhetorical prosemen, like Thomas Browne, Ruskin, and de Quincey—find the long sentence more congenial.

The undeniable liability of a passage of short sentences to be more lucid than a sequence of long ones, makes the first kind the favourite of those writers who set clarity before colour and rhythm. No one could be more lucid in narrative than George Borrow ; and a random comment in *Lavengro* reveals his opinion of what good prose should be. He quotes this sentence from *The Newgate Calendar* : " So I went with them to a music booth, where they made me almost drunk with gin, and began to talk their flash language, which I did not understand." Of this specimen he declares : " I have always looked upon this sentence as a masterpiece of the narrative style, it is so concise and yet so very clear." No age has been more fertile than the present one in rich and powerful prose ; and it will be found on analysis that, almost without exception, the contemporary prose-masters practise a style in which short sentences predominate : particular reference may be made to the work of Mr. H. M. Tomlinson, Mr. W. H. Hudson, Mr. Hilaire Belloc, Mr. D. H. Lawrence, and Mr. Norman Douglas.

This passage, written by Macaulay, and recording the death of Goldsmith, reveals the salient virtues of the short sentence—its transparency of meaning, and its capacity for dealing rapidly with a great bulk of facts without confusing or diverting the attention of the reader :

" He had been from boyhood a gambler, and at once the most sanguine and the most unskilful of gamblers. For a time he put off the day of inevitable ruin by temporary expedients. He obtained advances from booksellers, by promising to execute works which he never began. But at length this source of supply failed. He owed more than £2000 ; and he saw no hope of extrication from his embarrassments. His spirits and health

gave way. He was attacked by a nervous fever, which he thought himself competent to treat. It would have been happy for him if his medical skill had been appreciated as justly by himself as by others. Notwithstanding the degree which he pretended to have received at Padua, he could procure no patients. 'I do not practise,' he once said; 'I make it a rule to prescribe only for my friends.' 'Pray, dear Doctor,' said Beauclerk, 'alter your rule, and prescribe only for your enemies.' Goldsmith now, in spite of this excellent advice, prescribed for himself. The remedy aggravated the malady. The sick man was induced to call in real physicians; and they at one time imagined that they had cured the disease. Still his weakness and restlessness continued. He could get no sleep, he could take no food. 'You are worse,' said one of his medical attendants, 'than you should be from the degree of fever which you have. Is your mind at ease?' 'No, it is not,' were the last recorded words of Oliver Goldsmith. He died on the 3rd of April, 1774, in his forty-sixth year. He was laid in the churchyard of the Temple, but the spot was not marked by any inscription, and is now forgotten. The coffin was followed by Burke and Reynolds. Both these great men were sincere mourners. Burke, when he heard of Goldsmith's death, had burst into a flood of tears. Reynolds had been so much moved by the news that he had flung aside his brush and palette for the day."

This long sentence from Ruskin affords an illuminating contrast with the last example. It would be much better broken up; for as it stands the scene which it describes is not clear in outline: the details of the view run into each other. It needs disintegrating into its separate details, and reassembling into separate sentences for each aspect of the scene:

"Let us go together up the more retired street, at the end of which we can see the pinnacles of one of the towers, and then through the low grey gateway with its battlemented top, and small latticed window in the centre, into the inner private-looking road or close, where nothing goes in but the carts of the tradesmen who supply the bishop and the chapter, and where there are little shaven grassplots fenced in by neat rails, before old-fashioned groups of somewhat diminutive and excessively trim houses, with little oriel and bay windows jutting out here and there, and deep wooden cornices, and eaves painted cream-colour and white, and small porches to their doors in the shape of cockle-shells, or little crooked thick indescribable wooden gables warped a little on one side."

people from breaking out in rabbles and tumults, and, in short, from the poor plundering the rich ; I say, though they did much, the dead-cart did more, for, as I have said, that in five parishes only, there died about 5000 in twenty days, so there might be probably three times that number sick all that time, for some recovered, and great numbers fell sick every day, and died afterwards."

II. There follows a second example of the long sentence, which shows how successful the type may be if it is used appropriately. Here Ruskin is depicting the massive intricate beauty of St. Mark's ; and his long imposing sentence bears a cumulative power which is entirely apt to the subject-matter :

" And round the walls of the porches there are set pillars of variegated stones, jasper and porphyry and deep green serpentine spotted with flakes of snow, and marbles, that half refuse and half yield to the sunshine, Cleopatra-like, ' their bluest veins to kiss '—the shadow, as it steals back from them, revealing line after line of azure undulation, as a receding tide leaves the waved sand ; their capitals rich with interwoven tracery, rooted knots of herbage and drifting leaves of acanthus and vine, and mystical signs, all beginning and ending in the Cross ; and above them, in the broad archivolts, a continuous chain of language and of life—angels, and the signs of heaven, and the labours of men, each in its appointed season upon the earth ; and above these, another range of glittering pinnacles, mixed with white arches edged with scarlet flowers,—a confusion of delight, amidst which the breasts of the Greek horses are seen blazing in their breadth of golden strength, and the St. Mark's lion, lifted on a blue field covered with stars, until at last, as if in ecstasy, the crests of the arches break into a marble foam, and toss themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculptured spray, as if the breakers on the Lido shore had been frost-bound before they fell, and the sea-nymphs had inlaid them with coral and amethyst."

III. Mr. Hilaire Belloc, whose general preference is for short sentences, describes his travel book, *The Cruise of the "Nona,"* in this single long sentence. Its extreme length is well-butressed by parallel constructions ; and in its course gathers a powerful momentum which most perfectly conveys the impression its writer is trying to make :

" I could wish that this book, already so long as to have become intolerable to the reader, the writer, the printer, and

all others concerned in its production, already so heavy as to have become a business to the publisher, the carman, and the railway people (if, indeed, they transport it, but I have known of books transported in bulk on shipboard, and sinking to the glory of God, before they reached their destination, and that to the great advantage of our miserable world, which is abominably overcrowded with books); I could wish that this book, already so prolix, so otiose, so weary of its way that no poor gabbler in an inn ever more offended his audience than I will mine; I could wish that this book, which may be called the Great Sea Serpent of books, or again, The Cromwell Road of Books, or once again, The Panbiblicon, or endless Compendium, or again, The Long Arctic Night—what you will—I could wish that this book were longer still, I say, in order that I might drag you to perdition with the tedium of a million memories north of the Forelands, north of the Goodwins, north of Long Nose: memories of the Muddy Rivers of the Trinobantes, whose descendants inhabit rather than cultivate the Essex clay: memories of sandbanks rising out of the misty seas like whales, and of the platters of Harwich, and of the King's ship called *The Serpent*, and of Orford River, and of the Onion, and of Lowestoft, Yarmouth, and the exceedingly difficult labyrinth of the Wash, and of the awful great tide at King's Lynn."

IV. The incident so vividly recorded in this passage by Mr. H. M. Tomlinson requires the clear line of the short sentence. The lucid definition of each item of the account would be much less successfully accomplished in long sentences. Short deep strokes bring out the significance of the tremendous trifles which the writer is here depicting:

"One night, unable for a time to do more work because my hands were wet with sweat caused by concentration on small and delicate objects, I looked up at some books facing me on the table. A creature with eyes like tiny orange glow-lamps was sitting there watching me, its wings tremulous with energy.

It was a moth, demi-octavo in size, and I became at once a little nervous in its presence. I assured it earnestly that moths were quite outside my instructions. Nevertheless, when I rose gently to inspect it, so desirable a beauty I had never seen before. It was jet-black, body and wings, though its wings were marked sparsely with hieroglyphics in gold. Was it real? I got the net and secured it neatly as it rose; brought a killing bottle—might I not have one such creature when Bates and Wallace slew their thousands?—and watched the captive where it quivered, though not in alarm, in a loose fold of the

the same style: brief, sometimes even staccato sentences, nervous and nimble, giving always the impression that all superfluity has been fined away, and that the body of the narrative is trained down to the last ounce of essential matter.

VI. The following piece from Thoreau's *Walden* is an adequate illustration of the necessity of mixing longs and shorts. Evidently there is no suggestion of a fixed ratio between the two; but it is clear that from time to time, aware that he has been writing long sentences, Thoreau deliberately interposes a short sentence or two.

"I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around, or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's waggon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so I had my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest. My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that for yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow they have only one word, and they express the variety of meaning by pointing backward for yesterday, forward for to-morrow, and overhead for the passing day. This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting. A man must find his occasions in himself, it is true. The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his indolence.

I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel. It was a drama of many scenes and without an end. If we were always indeed getting our living, and regulating our lives according to the last and best mode we had learned, we should never be troubled with ennui. Follow your genius closely enough, and it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour. House-work was a pleasant pastime. When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget, dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white; and by the time the villagers had broken their fast the morning sun had dried my house sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were almost uninterrupted. It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough; life everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads,—because they once stood in their midst."

VII. The deliberation of the variety of longs and shorts is even more evident in Addison's account of The Royal Exchange (*Spectator*, No. 69): the work of one of the most painstaking of English prosemen. The first sentence of the second paragraph is an excellent example of a well-made loose sentence—easy and free in construction, yet neatly turned in rhythm:

"There is no place in the town which I so much love to frequent as the Royal Exchange. It gives me a secret satisfaction, and in some measure gratifies my vanity, as I am an Englishman, to see so rich an assembly of countrymen and foreigners, consulting together upon the private business of

mankind, and making this metropolis a kind of *emporium* for the whole earth. I must confess I look upon high-change to be a great council, in which all considerable nations have their representatives. Factors in the trading world are what ambassadors are in the politic world ; they negotiate affairs, conclude treaties, and maintain a good correspondence between those wealthy societies of men that are divided from one another by seas and oceans, or live on the different extremities of a continent. I have often been pleased to hear disputes adjusted between an inhabitant of Japan, and an alderman of London, or to see a subject of the Great Mogul entering into a league with one of the Czar of Muscovy. I am infinitely delighted in mixing with these several ministers of commerce, as they are distinguished by their different walks and different languages. Sometimes I am jostled among a body of Armenians ; sometimes I am lost in a crowd of Jews ; and sometimes make one in a group of Dutchmen. I am a Dane, Swede, or Frenchman at different times ; or rather fancy myself like the old philosopher, who upon being asked what countryman he was, replied that he was a citizen of the world. . . .

Nature seems to have taken a particular care to disseminate her blessings among the different regions of the world, with an eye to this mutual intercourse and traffic among mankind, that the natives of the several parts of the globe might have a kind of dependence upon one another, and be united together by their common interest. Almost every degree produces something peculiar to it. The food often grows in one country, and the sauce in another. The fruits of Portugal are corrected by the products of Barbadoes, and the infusion of a China plant is sweetened with the pith of an Indian cane. The Philippic islands give a flavour to our European bowls. The single dress of a woman of quality is often the product of an hundred climates. The muff and the fan come together from the different ends of the earth. The scarf is sent from the torrid zone, and the tippet from beneath the pole. The brocade petticoat rises out of the mines of Peru, and the diamond necklace out of the bowels of Indostan.

If we consider our own country in its natural prospect, without any of the benefits and advantages of commerce, what a barren and uncomfortable spot of earth falls to our share ! Natural historians tell us, that no fruit grows originally among us, besides hips and haws, acorns and pig-nuts, with other delicacies of the like nature ; that our climate of itself, and without the assistance of art, can make no further advances towards a plum than to a sloe, and carries an apple to no greater a perfection than a crab ; that our melons, our peaches, our figs, our apricots and cherries, are strangers among us, imported

in different ages, and naturalised in our English gardens ; and that they would all degenerate and fall away into the trash of our own country, if they were wholly neglected by the planter, and left to the mercy of our sun and soil. Nor had traffic more enriched our vegetable world, than it has improved the whole face of nature among us. Our ships are laden with the harvest of every climate. Our tables are stored with spices and oils and wines. Our rooms are filled with pyramids of China, and adorned with the workmanship of Japan. Our morning's draught comes to us from the remotest corners of the earth. We repair our bodies by the drugs of America, and repose ourselves under Indian canopies. My friend Sir Andrew calls the vineyards of France our gardens ; the spice-islands, our hot-beds ; the Persians our silk-weavers, and the Chinese our potters. Nature indeed furnishes us with the bare necessities of life, but traffic gives us a great variety of what is useful, and at the same time supplies us with everything that is convenient and ornamental. Nor is it the least part of this our happiness, that whilst we enjoy the remotest products of the north and south, we are free from those extremities of weather which give them birth ; that our eyes are refreshed with the green fields of Britain, at the same time that our palates are feasted with fruits that rise between the tropics.

For these reasons there are not more useful members in a commonwealth than merchants. They knit mankind together in a mutual intercourse of good offices, distribute the gifts of nature, find work for the poor, add wealth to the rich, and magnificence to the great. Our English merchant converts the tin of his own country into gold, and exchanges its wool for rubies. The Mahometans are clothed in our British manufacture, and the inhabitants of the frozen zone warmed with the fleeces of our sheep.

When I have been upon the change, I have often fancied one of our old kings standing in person, where he is represented in effigy, and looking down upon the wealthy concourse of people with which that place is every day filled. In this case, how would he be surprised to hear all the languages of Europe spoken in this little spot of his former dominions, and to see so many private men, who in his time would have been the vassals of some powerful baron, negotiating like princes for greater sums of money than were formerly to be met with in the royal treasury ! Trade, without enlarging the British territories, has given us a kind of additional empire. It has multiplied the number of the rich, made our landed estates infinitely valuable than they were formerly, and added to them an accession of other estates as valuable as the lands themselves."



## VI

A later chapter will be concerned in some detail with problems of diction; but here it may be indicated that variety of vocabulary is as necessary in prose composition as variety of sentence-forms. A limited stock of words must always restrict range of expression; and no amount of accuracy and variety in sentence-making can compensate for this deficiency. A man may read newspapers and detective yarns for fifty years without enlarging his supply of words; for these and their like have a notable paucity of language. They use the same anæmic clichés in the same familiar formations. The surest method of extending one's vocabulary is by reading the best books. The definition of the phrase "best books" is hardly necessary. The acknowledged classics are well enough known; and although no reader should be afraid to modify the verdict of the pundits by his own scale of values, even the dubious classics can teach him a lot. The final chapter of this book indicates the writers whose work must not be missed. By reading, and by reading only, can anyone acquire a range of terms which will supplement the bare diction of everyday usage. The absorption of dictionaries is useless; and the thesaurus is not enough. Only by seeing words in action, functioning in sentences, can we discover their precise significance and connotation.

A device employed by some self-made prose-writers is to copy out from the classics lists of words and phrases which please them, and to incorporate these in their own vocabulary. Such a method has a good deal to recommend it; but incidentally it must result in the absorption of a stock of famous sayings and familiar aphorisms whose identity must glare out of the writer's own prose. Many phrases, too, such as most from *Hamlet* have been staled and drained by common use; and it is vain to attempt to nourish one's vocabulary on those crumbs from the rich man's table which all the dogs have been nosing for three hundred years. Even the self-righteous students of the Bible might pause to consider that their habit of learning it in chunks tends to make them incorporate clichés in their own work: so that they can never write "woe" without tacking "desolation" on to it.

Even when a reasonably extensive vocabulary has been

acquired, it is still necessary to strive consciously for variety in its use. Few people employ any large proportion of the actual range of expression they possess, since most of us do not patiently pick out words, but are content with those which happen to lie at hand. The process of revision can remedy this deficiency. The blemish of repeating the same words can be removed by the substitution of synonyms for an over-worked word. A sequence of 72-gun-frigate words can be modified by short and sturdy Saxon words; and an excessive addiction to the monosyllabic can be rectified by the use of words of deeper draught.

Many authors have a few pet words whose frequent recurrence irritates the reader. Thus Swift, in *Gulliver's Travels*, uses the word "computation" again and again; Mr. Masfield, in prose and verse, works to death the word "beauty" and drains it of all significance for his readers; Mr. H. G. Wells has quite a little menagerie of strange outlandish words; and Lamb's queer anachronistic pets sometimes feel as inappropriate as a perch of parrots in an old English garden.

The principles which govern the composition of sentences apply with equal force to the selection of words. The vocabulary should be varied but not fantastic or mannered; and variety can be secured without resort to gallicisms, archaisms, hybrids, or freaks.

The kinds of variety which have been described in this chapter fall into two distinct categories. The first of these is to be continuously practised: the variation of sentence-form and of sentence-length. This is fundamental variety. The other kind, supplementary variety, must be considered as a spice or flavour of prose, and not as a basic ingredient. The delusion that such devices as inversion and suspension are a staple element of prose will lead to affectation and excess. The normal form is the basis of good prose: the loose structure, the subject-predicate-object pattern, and the customary position of adjective and adverb. This order, by long experiment and practice, has become the accepted pattern of English prose. The varieties of this which have been considered here would not challenge the customary forms but should relieve

The best prose is that which is content to be normal, when the normal form is not emphatic enough, or when it becoming stereotyped.

## CHAPTER V

### RHYTHM

#### I

**I**N a book on plain prose a consideration of rhythmic values may at first seem irrelevant. Yet it is evident that in the work of such plain prosemen as Macaulay, Addison, Goldsmith, Dryden, and Swift there is a definite marshalling of phrase and sentence into a rise and fall of sound. The subtler kind of rhythmic prose is to be considered as rhetoric (see p. 7) ; here we are concerned with those simpler and looser rhythms in which all competent prose must necessarily be organized. Prose rhythm is distinguished from the metre of verse by the irregularity of its syllable stress and of its wave-length. A sonnet, for example, is built on the syllable pattern  $\text{v}---$ , and on the wave-length of five bars to the line :

When I | do count | the clock | that tells | the time, |  
And see | the brave | day sunk | in hid | eous night ; |  
When I | behold | the vi | olet | past prime, |  
And sa | ble curls | all sil | ver'd o'er | with white ; |  
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,  
Which erst from heart did canopy the herd,  
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,  
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,  
Then of thy beauty do I question make,  
That thou among the wastes of time must go,  
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake  
And die as fast as they see others grow ;  
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence  
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

A prose passage of fourteen lines or so, is, on the contrary, free from any such stringent principle of recurrence ; and if the reader cares to amuse himself by completing the marking of the stresses and the wave-lengths in the following passage

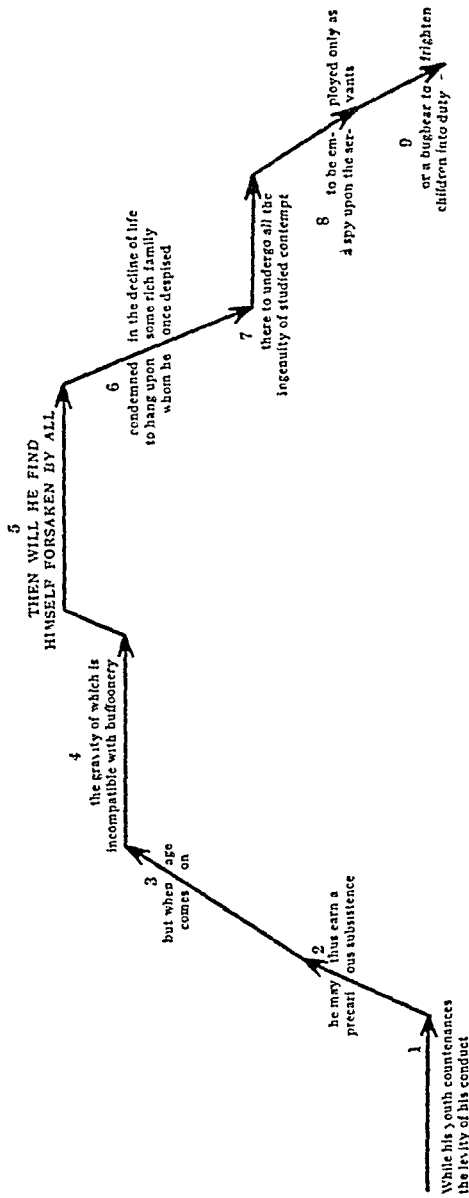
he will find that it is not organized in a symmetrical pattern as the verse was, but that the stressed syllables occur sporadically and that the words fall into groups of irregular length: the sole uniformity being that no wave can occupy more than one sentence:

"When Hantōng, | the last emperor of the house of Mīng, | saw himself besieged in his own city by the usurper, | he was resolved to issue from his palace with six hundred of his guards and give the enemy battle; | but they forsook him. | Being thus without hopes, and choosing death rather than to fall alive into the hands of a rebel, he retired to his garden, conducting his little daughter, an only child, in his hand; then in a private arbour, unsheathing his sword, he stabbed the young innocent to the heart, and then dispatched himself, leaving the following words written with blood on the border of his vest: 'Forsaken by my subjects, abandoned by my friends, use my body as you will, but spare, O spare my people!'"

Rhythm is the fluency of sound or (in painting and sculpture) of line, and is in no way limited by a principle of uniformity. The rhythm of a mountain mass is delineated by its contours, by the irregular folds and ridges of its shape; and this is the nearest analogy to the rhythm of prose. Despite the fact that the first manifests itself to the eye and the second to the ear, the formation of a prose paragraph is reminiscent of the formation of a mountain range. A sentence quoted in the last chapter is reproduced in the accompanying chart to demonstrate this analogy. It is from Goldsmith's account of the unstable foothold in society of a hanger-on like Beau Tibbs.

In this diagrammatic representation the sloping lines convey the upward or downward movement of the chief subsidiary clauses to or from the summit of the main clause, and the horizontal lines define the minor modifications introduced by the less important clauses and by parenthetical phrases.

This sentence has not the regular contours of a *verset stanza*, but it certainly has a plan of construction. There is a pinnacle in the middle of the sentence, rising from lower places and subsiding again, after the climax, into the lower level: an organization of rhythm which closely follows the rise and fall of the import of the sentence.



There is a similar perfection of poise in this sentence from Hardy: a carefully-graded ascent to the middle of the sentence, where the main clause (*italicized in our reproduction*) holds its dominating position, and a complementary descent in the final clause of the sentence. The contours of the rhythm closely follow the proportions of importance given to the various items of the subject-matter by their respective positions in the sentence:

"As this solitary and silent girl stood there in the moonlight, a straight slim figure, clothed in a plaitless gown, the contours of womanhood so undeveloped as to be scarcely perceptible in her, the marks of poverty and toil effaced by the misty hour, *she touched sublimity at points*, and looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism."

The chief problem of prose rhythm is to devise such an ebb and flow of sound as will bear on its surface the rise and fall of the signification of the sentence, and which will be undiverted in its progress by any splash or backwash of sound. There is a radical relation between sense and sound; and it will, as a rule, be found that a sentence which is logically and lucidly composed is already rhythmically well-turned; and that a sentence which is obscure in meaning is uncertain in its rhythm.

Every sentence has a rhythm in so far as the words of which it is composed naturally crystallize into groups; just as all speech has rhythm, since we naturally stress certain syllables in speaking, and since we speak in waves of words and not in single detached words. But evidently there are wide differences in the quality of the rhythm of Thomas Browne, Hooker, and Ruskin on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhythm of such a sentence as "Prisoner was arrested in an empty hut, near the railway station shortly after midnight." The natural, automatic rhythm in which every sentence must inevitably be cast does not here concern us; any more than in a study of the fine art of the ballet we should be concerned with the fact that even a lame dog walks in some kind of rhythm. Our concern is not with the automatic rhythm of writing, but with the contrived patterns of cadence which good prose tries to achieve.

## II

It is essential to distinguish, in the English tradition, between two kinds of prose: that which appeals to the ear and that which appeals to the eye. A fuller classification would include a third category: prose which is merely to be comprehended; and the decay of leisure and the torrent of modern book-production have generated a reading public to whom words have no pictorial associations or pleasurable rhythms, but merely convey a meaning. The current demand for purely *readable* prose is so pronounced as to be reflected not alone in the great bulk of competent prose which we daily read in newspapers and stories, but also in much of the work of the best contemporary writers. This definitely workaday prose which makes no pretence to the graces of art is certainly not to be contemned. Most writers, after all, may be well content if they can produce work which, distinguished by little art and contrivance, is clear and terse and readable. Prose for the eye specializes in the communication of images to the mind's eye of the reader; and it is, therefore, most interested in the selection of suggestive epithets which will build up in the imagination of the reader the fabric of powerful and vivid imagery. Prose for the eye is, above all, prose of verbal richness. This passage, describing Cleopatra's visit to Antony, is full of words—even to its proper names—designed to evoke coloured fancies:

"Therefore when she was sent unto by divers letters, both from *Antonius* himself, and also from his friends, she made so light of it and mocked *Antonius* so much, that she disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of *Cydnus*; the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the musicke of flutes, howboys, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess *Venus* commonly drawn in picture: and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys apparelled as Painters do set forth god *Cupid*, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. Her Ladies and Gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were apparelled like the Nymphs *Nereids* (which are the Mermaids of the waters) and like the *Graces*, some steering the helm, others tending the tackle and ropes of the barge, out

of the which there came a wonderful passing sweet savour of perfumes, that perfumed the wharf's side, pestered with innumerable multitudes of people."

The prose whose purpose is to allure the ear is much less interested in brilliance of phrase and vigour of epithet. It seeks to cultivate the charm of cadence, the sensuous appeal of alliteration, onomatopœia, and vowel harmonies. Sometimes prose makes the twofold appeal simultaneously: Stevenson, for instance, frequently wrote prose which is cadenced as well as concrete. And Mr. G. K. Chesterton, despite the monotony of his favourite sentence-form, has a similar talent for the simultaneous satisfaction of both the ear and the eye of his readers.

This fragment of prose by that modern master of rhythm and phrase illustrates these competing interests which prose occasionally puts before the reader. It is as rich in image and epithet as it is in cadence :

"At that very moment birds of a peculiarly vivid green sheeniness were hovering and dipping between the deep blue of the sky and the mountainous blossoming. Little birds, with unusually long and attenuated bills, playing, fluttering, hisping, courting, and apparently sucking the heady nectar from the snowy and ivory cups, while poised like animate gems on the wing. He had again opened his mouth, but his half-brother had laid a lean tingling hand on his sleeve. 'Listen !' he said.

Half-stifled, jetting, delirious bursts of song twinkled, belled, rose, eddied, overflowed from the tented depths of the tree, like the yells and laughter of a playground of children suddenly released for an unexpected half-holiday. Listen, indeed ! The noise of the creatures was still echoing in his ears as he sat there bulkily swaying, his eyes fixed on the pallid, gliding hedgerow from his fusty cab."

The finest rhythmic prose must, on the classification developed in the first chapter of this book, be regarded as rhetoric; and the full beauty of its sonorous periods is revealed only when it is read aloud. At the other extreme from this is the prose which has no other aspiration than to be utilitarian : the prose of police-court reports and commercial catalogues ; and between the two extremes is the prose we are concerned with in this exposition : serviceable prose, which, without soaring into rhetoric, deliberately practises such effects as may give its periods a pleasant modulation of sound.

The very pronounced majority of readers are unaware of



any such quality as rhythm in prose ; yet even these would probably detect errors of concord or a misuse of words in the stuff they read. There are at least two categories into which we might divide our reading : one comprising those books which we devour for the sake of an exciting plot or for some similar recreational virtue ; and the other containing those books in which the form of the writing is as important as the substance. Those who limit their reading to the first of these groups can never learn to appreciate the meaning of rhythm ; and even those who include in their reading books from the second category will fail to derive the fullest satisfaction from them until they realize that the subtlest qualities of prose reveal themselves only when the prose is read aloud. It is true that the eye of the susceptible reader of prose learns to catch a hint of the cadence of a fine passage ; just as the eye of the practised musician reading a score will spontaneously transmit into an aural sensation something of what is seen. But even a sensitive reader is denied the fullest satisfaction from a fine cadence until, reading aloud, he gives his ear the opportunity to confirm the rumour of the eye.

A stage is reached in the process of composition at which further improvement of a passage can be secured only by reading aloud what has been written ; and the earlier that stage is habitually reached the better is the work likely to be. Not alone for the sake of securing an effective rhythm is this routine to be encouraged. Many an ambiguity can be detected by reading aloud the dubious passage, many a false concord and uncertain construction made manifest ; for the ear is more susceptible to such faults than the eye is, since, among other reasons, for the first twenty years or so of our lives we are more accustomed to hearing good English than to writing it. And this aural experience, however unconsciously acquired, is stored up to serve as a touchstone when the eye hesitates to confirm or to deny the validity of something we have written. Finally, important as reading aloud is to ensure accuracy, it is quite indispensable for the composing of well-turned rhythmic prose.

### III

The whole organization of prose rhythm is looser than the metrical system of verse. Prose has no unit of rhythm comparable to the verse foot, of which there is a small and

definite number of types. A paragraph of prose may fall into any number of waves, no two of which need be of the same duration: one may consist of a single word, the next of twenty words. This absence of uniformity, while it eliminates some of the problems of the poet—such as the difficulty of compressing words into a stringent pattern of sound—does not necessarily make good prose rhythm essentially easier to manipulate. The very absence of a unit in the rhythm of prose may be said to make the achievement of a well-cadenced piece of prose in some respects more difficult than the turning of a verse on one of the fixed metrical patterns. In verse—as distinguished from poetry, in which rhythm is not the mould of expression but the accompanying music to it—the basic uniformity of the metre makes the turning of the lines comparatively easy to control. In prose there is no such rule of thumb scale, and the scrupulous writer must therefore rely upon his delicacy of touch in the contrivance of pleasurable cadence. He has to be a law to himself; and this self-government, for a person with a conscience, is more exacting than mere obedience to ready-made codes.

In prose and verse alike the rhythmic flow is modified by certain qualities of sound—which manifest their effect only when the lines are read aloud—but which are deliberately calculated by the writer as he is composing his work. Long-vowel sounds, for example, have a specific rhythmic value; an agglomeration of certain consonantal sounds may have a decisive influence on the cadence of a paragraph of prose. The effect of these sound values is, broadly speaking, to modify the time or pace of a passage. Where short vowels predominate, the pace of the prose will be accelerated: the waves of rhythm will rise and fall quickly; where long-vowel sounds abound the waves will progress more leisurely. A well-judged alliteration may similarly determine the rhythmic value of a sentence. The repeated "f" will give a cleaving, forceful edge to a wave of sound; the alliteration of "m" may momentarily suspend the wave; the "s" may send the words leaping like spray through a sentence: "But let him feign never so carefully, there is not a man but has his pulses shaken when Pan trolls out a stave of ecstasy and sets the world ringing."

The diction of a passage, too, is a determinant of its rhythm. Everberating, many-syllabled words will swell the length of

a wave ; short simple words will diminish it. A comparison of these two examples will reveal the degree in which diction can assert its control of rhythm :

(1) " The appellation of Great has been often bestowed, and sometimes deserved, but Charlemagne is the only prince in whose favour the title has been indissolubly blended with the name. That name, with the addition of saint, is inserted in the Roman calendar ; and the saint, by a rare felicity, is crowned with the praises of the historians and philosophers of an enlightened age. His real merit is doubtless enhanced by the barbarism of the nation and the times from which he emerged ; but the apparent magnitude of an object is likewise enlarged by an unequal comparison ; and the ruins of Palmyra derive a casual splendour from the nakedness of the surrounding desert."—Gibbon.

(2) " It was not till the ship was out throbbing swiftly over the smooth sea and darkness had fallen that they began to sing. Then those of them who were not working gathered together with a stringed instrument forward and sang of pity and of death. One of them said to me, ' Knight, can your grace sing ? ' I told him that I could sing, certainly, but that my singing was displeasing, and that I only knew foreign songs. He said that singing was a great solace, and desired to hear a song of my own country. So I sang them a song out of Sussex, to which they listened in deep silence, and when it was concluded their leader snapped and twanged at the strings again and began another song about the riding of horses in the hills.

So we passed the short night until the sky upon our quarter grew faintly pale and the little wind that rises before morning awakened the sea."—Mr. Hilaire Belloc.

The position of a single word may exercise a domination over the rhythm of a sentence. Thus in this verse from *Ezekiel* the words " Lo " and " behold " create impressive pauses in the movement of the sentence ; and they govern its meaning by acting as springboards from which an emphatic significance is thrown upon the words which follow : " The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, and caused me to pass by them round about, and behold, there were very many in the open valley, and lo, they were very dry."

Rhythm is affected by such modifications as these ; but it is fundamentally determined by sentence-structure. It

follows, therefore, that a well-built sentence is likely to be rhythmically adequate ; and that, if the principle of variation is continuously applied in composition the rhythm of the writing will be plastic and expressive. Many a writer of well-modulated prose is unaware of any conscious devisal of rhythm on his part ; and this is a further indication of the fact that a well-constructed sentence is likely to be mellifluous in cadence.

## IV

The simple sentence-form offers least scope for rhythmic variety. Within a paragraph of simple sentences the only possible variation will be a comparatively slight one : in the length of the waves of sound. There cannot be any considerable alternation of long and short sentences. The rhythmic effect, therefore, of a paragraph of short sentences is like that of a choppy sea : the short waves hurry along, but their effect soon becomes disturbing and unpleasant. The effect, in practice, since we read prose and do not speak it, of a long sequence of short sentences is not so noticeably felt as it would be if we read aloud ; but even the eye begins to tire of the monotony, and presently transfers this exhaustion to the other sensory centres, so that we begin to feel and hear the choppy rhythm. Admirable as the simple sentence is for certain effects, its rhythmic properties are decidedly unsatisfying. It pays for its clarity by its lack of sonority. As a rhythmical variant, a passage of simple sentences breaking the ample swell of larger waves of sound, may be most effective ; but the continuous use of the short wave produces toneless and undistinguished prose. Such writing may, of course, still possess pictorial attraction ; but not rhythmical distinction.

As a safe and adequate form for the beginner the simple sentence has already been shown to be commendable. It minimizes the likelihood of ambiguity and opacity ; it protects the writer from the danger of entanglement which a complex form too easily presents ; and although its rhythmic satisfaction is limited, yet good sense is always to be preferred to good sound. Sonority may cover a multitude of sins.

## V

But if the long complex sentence is more difficult to compose, its successful accomplishment gives a zest to writing which the

more timid practitioner can never know. The long rhythmic burst is like surf-riding on a plank : there is the constant risk of spills, but there is always the prospect of a perfect consummation such as this of de Quincey's :

" If the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis, on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully in the silence and desertion of the streets, and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man—if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting, as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible, by reaction."

The gathering speed of the long sentence is succeeded by a brief clinching sentence : the surf ride completed, the expert leaps nimbly ashore where a less dexterous performer would collapse in a smother of opaque foam. The long wave of a complex sentence may, however, share the rhythmic defects of the simple form—when waves of the same long span succeed one another in an unvaried monotony. This deficiency is very apparent in the following fragment from Hakluyt :

" The second of July we found shoal water, which smelt so sweetly, and was so strong a smell, as if we had been in the midst of some delicate garden, abounding with all kinds of odoriferous flowers ; by which we were assured that the land could not be far distant. And keeping good watch and bearing but slack sail, the fourth of the same month we arrived upon the coast, which we supposed to be a continent and firm land, and we sailed along the same 120 English miles before we could find any entrance, or river issuing into the Sea. The first that appeared unto us we entered, though not without some difficulty, and cast anchor about three arquebus-shot within the haven's mouth, on the left hand of the same ; and after thanks given to God for our safe arrival thither, we manned our boats, and went to view the land next adjoining, and to take possession of the same in the right of the Queen's most excellent Majesty, as rightful Queen and Princess of the same, and after delivered

the same over to your use, according to her Majesty's grant and letters patents, under her Highness's great Seal. Which being performed, according to the ceremonies used in such enterprises, we viewed the land about us, being, whereas we first landed, very sandy and low towards the water side, but so full of grapes as the very beating and surge of the sea overflowed them. Of which we found such plenty, as well there as in all places else, both on the sand and on the green soil on the hills, as in the plains, as well on every little shrub, as also climbing towards the tops of high Cedars, that I think in all the world the like abundance is not to be found : and myself having seen those parts of Europe that most abound, find such difference as were incredible to be written."

The well-wrought sentences already quoted on pages 30 and 31 may be reconsidered as specimens of perfectly turned rhythm; and there is some significance in the fact that sentences which, as we saw, were remarkable for their lucidity should also be notable for their rhythm. There is no general principle to be derived from these examples, however; for writing which is perfectly clear in meaning may have no rhythmic felicity at all. On the other hand, prose which is well-cadenced does naturally convey its meaning more clearly into the reader's comprehension than does the prose whose periods are clumsy and ill-favoured. In the two sentences to which attention is again directed there is a coincidence between the ebb and flow of sound and the proportions of emphasis which are put on the various parts of the substance of the sentence. There is a close sympathy between the progression of sound and the progression of meaning; the crest of meaning is coincident with the crest of sound.

A soundly-constructed sentence is more likely to be well-modulated than one in which the material is shakily put together. If the components of the sentence do not fall into their proper places they are certain to interfere with the rhythmic development of the sentence. From the top of a cliff one may watch a long roller sweeping in to the land. Suddenly it reaches a jagged pinnacle of projecting rock on which it breaks its back. Failing to achieve its sonorous summation on the beach it smashes prematurely into an eddy welter of spray. If an irrelevant idea or an obstreperous element is permitted to lie in the fairway of a sentence it inevitably shatter the rhythm. In the examples already

given on page 37 a whole reef of ugly rocks is encountered in each sentence ; with the result that the flow of the period is entirely broken up. In the following additional example from Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas Moore* there is a similar breaking of the cadence by rebellious and cacophonous phrases and clauses :

" When Sir Thomas More came from Westminster to the Towerward again, his daughter, desirous to see her father, whom she thought she should never see in this world after, and also to have his final blessing, gave attendance about the Tower wharf, where she knew he should pass by, ere he could enter into the Tower. There tarrying for his coming home, as soon as she saw him, after his blessings on her knees reverently received, she, hasting towards, without consideration of care of herself, pressing in amongst the midst of the throng and the company of the Guard, that with halberds and bills were round about him, hastily ran to him, and there openly in the sight of all them embraced and took him about the neck and kissed him, who well liking her most daughterly love and affection towards him, gave her his fatherly blessing, and many godly words of comfort besides, from whom after she was departed, she not satisfied with the former sight of her dear father, having respect neither to herself nor to the press of the people and multitude that were about him, suddenly turned back again, and ran to him as before, took him about the neck, and divers times together most lovingly kissed him, and at last with a full heavy heart was fain to depart from him ; the beholding whereof was to many of them that were present thereat so lamentable, that it made them for very sorrow to mourn and weep."

A slovenly construction often leaves a fragment tacked awkwardly to the end of a sentence. The effect of such a lapse on the rhythm is to create an unpleasant lollop of sound at the end of the wave : thus, " It is no exaggeration to say that Borrow was never, in the long years he spent in retirement at Oulton, happy." A very simple recasting would yield quite an adequate rhythm : " It is no exaggeration to say that, in the long years he spent in retirement at Oulton, Borrow was never happy." Here is another unfortunate rhythm, also caused by clumsy construction : " After a prolonged period of imprisonment in Edinburgh Castle, where he appears to have retained a fair measure of freedom of movement, the Earl was released on the new King's accession, being then thirty-three."

Jingles and cacophonies inevitably rupture the cadence of prose. Writing of the essential attribute which distinguishes the authentic artist from the dabbler, Stevenson, usually so sure in his control of rhythm, says that in relation to the art of writing the craftsman must have an "unextinguishable zest in its technical successes." The reiteration of the *ex, ec, es* sounds irremediably breaks the flow of the sentence. The other asperities which were quoted on pages 35-6 to show how they frustrate lucidity may again be considered as rhythmic impediments. It will generally be found that whatever obscures the meaning of a sentence also interferes with the smooth progression of its sound. Carlyle was often capable of fine vibrant prose ; but too frequently he adopted in his writing tortuous constructions, full of inversion and oddly-consorted clauses which produced harsh and broken rhythms :

" These clear eyes of neighbour Jocelin looked on the bodily presence of King John ; the very John *Sansterre*, or Lackland, who signed *Magna Charta* afterwards in Runnymede. Lackland, with a great retinue, boarded once, for the matter of a fortnight, in St. Edmundsbury Convent ; daily in the very eyesight, palpable to the very fingers of our Jocelin : O Jocelin, what did he say, what did he do ; how looked he, lived he,—at the very lowest, what coat or breeches had he on ? Jocelin is obstinately silent. Jocelin marks down what interests him ; entirely deaf to us. With Jocelin's eyes we discern almost nothing of John Lackland. As through a glass darkly, we with our own eyes and appliances, intensely looking, discern at most : A blustering, dissipated human figure, with a kind of blackguard quality air, in cramoisy velvet, or other uncertain texture, uncertain cut, with much plumage and fringing ; amid numerous other human figures of the like ; riding abroad with hawks ; talking noisy nonsense ;—tearing out the bowels of St. Edmundsbury Convent (its larders namely and cellars) in the most ruinous way, by living at rack and manger there. Jocelin notes only, with a slight subacidity of manner, that the King's Majesty, *Dominus Rex*, did leave, as gift for our St. Edmund Shrine, a handsome enough silk cloak,—or rather pretended to leave, for one of his retinue borrowed it of us, and we never got sight of it again ; and, on the whole, that the *Dominus Rex*, at departing, gave us 'thirteen sterlingis,' one shilling and one penny, to say a mass for him ; and so departed,—like a shabby Lackland as he was ! 'Thirteen pence sterling,' this was what the Convent got from Lackland, for all the victuals



And yet he wins after all. At the very last moment he seems to summon all his remaining strength and in one final and devastating sweep mows down the orchestra rank by rank. . . . You awake from the nightmare to discover the victor acknowledging the applause in a series of his inimitable bows." —*The Journal of a Disappointed Man*.

This piece of Stevenson's prose displays a very pleasing unity of sense and sound. The well-developed metaphor which he employs is borne on perfectly measured waves of sound :

"As we go catching and catching at this or that corner of knowledge, now getting a foresight of generous possibilities, now chilled with a glimpse of prudence, we may compare the headlong course of our years to a swift torrent in which a man is carried away ; now he is dashed against a boulder, now he grapples for a moment to a trailing spray ; at the end, he is hurled out and overwhelmed in a dark and bottomless ocean. We have no more than glimpses and touches ; we are torn away from our theories ; we are spun round and round and shown this or the other view of life, until only fools or knaves can hold to their opinions. We take a sight at a condition in life, and say we have studied it ; our most elaborate view is no more than an impression. If we had breathing space, we should take the occasion to modify and adjust ; but at this breakneck hurry, we are no sooner boys than we are adult, no sooner in love than married or jilted, no sooner one age than we begin to be another, and no sooner in the fulness of our manhood than we begin to decline towards the grave."

The following fragment from Thackeray again achieves this perfect understanding between rhythm and sense—or, in this instance, rather between rhythm and mood. The cadence is languid and sauntering : an effect most cunningly contrived by such tricks as the deliberate rime in the fourth line, the repetition of "lazy", the drowsy assonance of "trailing lazily" ; and, although the wave-lengths are carefully varied, a short and appropriately heavy-footed kind predominates :

"There was a sweet pretty river walk we used to take in the evening, and mark the mountains round gloaming with a deeper purple ; the shades creeping up the golden walls ; the river brawling, the cattle calling, the maids round the fountains babbling and bawling ; and several times in the course of our walks, we overtook a lazy, slouching boy, with a rusty coat, trousers not too long, and big feet trailing lazily one after the other, and large lazy hands dawdling from out the tight

sleeves, and in the lazy hands a little book, which my lad held up to his face, and which I daresay charmed and ravished him, that he was blind to the beautiful sights around him ; unmindful I would venture to lay any wager, of the lessons he had to learn to-morrow ; forgetful of mother, waiting supper, and father preparing a scolding ;—absorbed utterly and entirely in his book."

In very pronounced contrast to the preceding examples is this reflection on mortality by Vaughan ; it falls into the customary cadences of rhetoric, and attains its consummation through an accumulation of parallel sentences. But different as it is in tone from the other examples, it again reveals that accord of rhythm and meaning which characterizes the finest prose. Here the dignity of the thought is carried along in slow and sonorous rhythms :

" What is become now of these great merchants of the earth, and where is the fruit of all their labours under the sun ? Why, truly they are taken out of the way as all others and they are cut off as the tops of the ears of corn. Their dwelling is in the dust, and as for their place here, it lies waste, and is not known. Nettles and brambles come up in it, and the owl and the raven dwell in it. But if you will visit them at their long homes, and knock at those desolate doors, you shall find some remains of them, a heap of loathsomeness and corruption. O miserable and sad mutations. Where is now their pompous and shining train ? Where are their triumphs, fire works and feasts, with all the ridiculous tumults of a popular, prodigious pride ? Where is their purple and fine linen, their chains of massy gold, and sparkling ornaments of pearls ? Where are their cooks and carvers, their fowlers and fishers ? Where are their curious utensils, their cups of agate, crystal and china-earth ? Where are their sumptuous chambers, where they inclosed themselves in cedar, ivory and ebony ? Where is their music, their soft and delicate dressings, pleasing motions, and excellency of looks ? Where are their rich perfumes, costly conserves, with their precious and various store of foreign and domestic wines ? Where are their sons and their daughters fair as the flowers, straight as the palm trees, and polished as the corners of the temple ? O pitiful and astonishing transformations. All is gone, all is dust, deformity and desolation. Their bones are scattered in the pit, and instead of well-set hair, there is baldness, and loathsomeness instead of beauty. This is the state of their bodies, and (O blessed Jesus) who knows the state of their souls ? "

The difficulties of the very long sentence in retaining its unity of form and meaning have already been considered ; and similar difficulties in the organization of its rhythm are equally liable to arise. In a previous chapter it was suggested that, so long as the components of the sentence are arranged logically and consecutively, its length may extend over many lines. And it will be found that when the sentence is perfectly unified it is also well-turned in rhythm. Many examples of the good long sentence have already been given ; but here we may pillory a typical specimen of the long sentence which is defective in clarity, construction, and cadence. Its cargo of meaning is badly stowed away, it is loaded above the Plimsoll line ; and so it flounders along without ease or pace of progress, drifting like a water-logged derelict :

" The visible operation of the mind upon the body may be classed under three heads.<sup>1</sup>

First, the operation of the intellectual powers upon the features, in the fine cutting and chiselling of them, and removal from them of signs of sensuality and sloth, by which they are blunted and deadened ; and substitution of energy and intensity for vacancy and insipidity (by which wants alone the faces of many fair women are utterly spoiled and rendered valueless) ; and by the keenness given to the eye and fine moulding and development of the brow, of which effects Sir Charles Bell has well described the desirableness and opposition to brutal types, only this he has not sufficiently observed, that there are certain virtues of the intellect in measure inconsistent with each other, as perhaps great subtlety with great comprehensiveness, and high analytical with high imaginative power : or that at least, if consistent and compatible, there signs upon the features are not the same, so that the outward form cannot express both, without in a measure expressing neither ; and so there are certain separate virtues of the outward form correspondent with the more constant employment or more prevailing capacity of the brain, as the piercing keenness, or open and reflective comprehensiveness, of the eye and forehead : and that all these virtues of form are ideal, only these the most so which are the signs of the worthiest powers of the intellect, though which these may be, we will not at present stay to enquire.

Secondly, . . . ! "

<sup>1</sup> A clear and decisive opening, whose promise is unfortunately not fulfilled in what follows.

## VI

Any attempt to catalogue the most effective rhythmic forms of prose would be as misguided as it would be incapable of completion ; but there are certain cadences which so repeatedly occur in English prose as to be worth considering, and, possibly imitating. One of the most pleasant of the simpler forms is the combination of a short wave with two following longer ones : After writing "*It is difficult to fancy how the mediocrities reconcile such sayings with their proverbs,*" Stevenson goes on : "According to the latter, every lad who goes to sea is an egregious ass ; never to forget your umbrella through a long life would seem a higher and wiser flight of achievement than to go smiling to the stake ; and so long as you are a bit of a coward and inflexible in money matters you fulfil the whole duty of man."

The slightly-varied form, of two shorts followed by a single long, is equally effective : "The last gleam fades in the west, the moon shows a cold tranquil profile, and over the multitudinous waste of waters broods the inscrutable silence of eternity."

The succession of two long waves by a short one is another possible variant ; and this form enables a stress to be thrown upon the last part of a sentence. This example is from Lafcadio Hearn : "Softly beautiful are the tremulous shadows of leaves on the sunned sand ; and the scent of flowers comes thinly sweet with every waft of tepid air ; and there is a humming of bees."

A very effectual formation consists of a sequence of short waves mounting to a final wave whose grandeur carries the period to a triumphant climax. This construction is evident in Pater's description of La Gioconda :

"She is older than the rocks among which she sits ; like the vampire she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave ; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her ; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants ; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the Mother of Mary ; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands."

The choice of a final sentence for a paragraph commonly

lights upon one of the long type, which closes the period in a sustained swirl of sound : like this of Prescott's :

"Such was the beautiful vision which broke on the eyes of the Conquerors. And even now, when so sad a change has come over the scene ; when the stately forests have been laid low, and the soil, unsheltered from the fierce radiance of a tropical sun, is in many places abandoned to sterility ; when the waters have retired, leaving a broad and ghastly margin white with the incrustation of salts, while the cities and hamlets on their borders have mouldered into ruins ;—even now that desolation broods over the landscape, so indestructible are the lines of beauty which Nature has traced on its features, that no traveller, however cold, can gaze on them with any other emotions than those of astonishment and rapture."

The next passage is a piece of Newman's "cloistral silver-veined prose." Its first sentence is cast in the neatly-balanced cadence of two longs, a short, and two more longs ; and the rest of the paragraph falls into a studied pattern of rhythms which is well worth a careful scrutiny :

"Many a more fruitful coast or isle is washed by the blue Ægean, many a spot is there more beautiful or sublime to see, many a territory more ample ; but there was one charm in Attica, which in the same perfection was nowhere else. The deep pastures of Arcadia, the plain of Argos, the Thessalian vale, these had not the gift ; Bœotia, which lay to its immediate north, was notorious for its very want of it. The heavy atmosphere of that Bœotia might be good for vegetation, but it was associated in popular belief with the dulness of the Bœotian intellect : on the contrary, the special purity, elasticity, clearness, and salubrity of the air of Attica, fit concomitant and emblem of its genius, did that for it which earth did not ;—it brought out every bright hue and tender shade of the landscape over which it was spread, and would have illuminated the face even of a more bare and rugged country."

By a flexible combination of balanced sentences, Johnson, whose mastery in construction is as notable as his deficiency in diction, creates the familiar sweep of his periods :

"Of the passions with which the mind of man is agitated, it may be observed, that they naturally hasten towards their own extinction, by inciting and quickening the attainment of their objects. Thus fear urges our flight, and desire animates our progress ; and if there are some which perhaps may be indulged till they outgrow the good appropriated to their

satisfaction, as it is frequently observed of avarice and ambition, yet their immediate tendency is to some means of happiness really existing, and generally within the prospect. The miser always imagines that there is a certain sum that will fill his heart to the brim; and every ambitious man, like King Pyrrhus, has an acquisition in his thoughts that is to terminate his labours, after which he shall pass the rest of his life in ease or gaiety, in repose or devotion.

Sorrow is perhaps the only affection of the breast that can be excepted from this general remark, and it therefore deserves the particular attention of those who have assumed the arduous province of preserving the balance of the mental constitution. The other passions are diseases indeed, but they necessarily direct us to their proper cure. A man at once feels the pain, and knows the medicine, to which he is carried with greater haste as the evil which requires it is more excruciating, and cures himself by unerring instinct, as the wounded stags of Crete are related by Aelian to have recourse to vulnerary herbs. But for sorrow there is no remedy provided by nature; it is often occasioned by accidents irreparable, and dwells upon objects that have lost or changed their existence; it requires what it cannot hope, that the laws of the universe should be repealed; that the dead should return, or the past should be recalled."

So uncommonly perfect is Johnson's control of form and rhythm that we may add another example of his skill:

"That affluence and power, advantages extrinsic and adventitious, and therefore easily separable from those by whom they are possessed, should very often flatter the mind with expectations of felicity which they cannot give, raises no astonishment; but it seems rational to hope that intellectual greatness should produce better effects; that minds qualified for great attainments should first endeavour their own benefit; and that they who are most able to teach others the way to happiness, should with most certainty follow it themselves.

But this expectation, however plausible, has been very frequently disappointed. The heroes of literary as well as civil history have been very often no less remarkable for what they have suffered, than for what they have achieved; and volumes have been written only to enumerate the miseries of the learned, and relate their unhappy lives and untimely deaths."

## VII

Since the main characteristic of prose rhythm is its freedom from uniformity, any lapse into the regular rhythm

of verse is a blemish. The term "lapse" indicates the quality of the defect: if a writer intending to produce prose actually composes some metrical lines there is evidence of a lack of design and purpose. Since his verse is an accident it is bad prose. On occasion a writer may take to verse by intention; and the occurrence of such a devised effect is in no way out of place in prose. In the following passage, for example, it is evident that the composer was filled with an exaltation which naturally assumed the cadence of poetry:

" *Vive la joia !* was in her lips—*Vive la joia !* was in her eyes. A transient spark of amity shot across the space betwixt us—She looked amiable !—Why could I not live, and end my days thus ? Just disposer of our joys and sorrows, cried I, why could not a man sit down in the lap of content here—and dance, and sing, and say his prayers, and go to heaven with this nut-brown maid ? "

Much of the passage is as obviously verse as though it had been set out in verse lines :

" *Vive la joia !* was in her lips—  
*Vive la joia !* was in her eyes. . . .  
 And dance, and sing, and say his prayers,  
 And go to heaven with this nut-brown maid."

There is no valid objection to such an occasional verse flourish of trumpets in a piece of prose.

Most often the appearance of a fragment of blank verse in a prose passage is sheer accident, and is therefore to be considered as a lapse. R. D. Blackmore spoils much of his work by this unconscious lapse, a defect which betokens either imperfect revision or a very insensitive ear. Sheridan's change from prose to regular blank verse in these lines from *The Rivals* may equally well be by design as by accident; for the lines are spoken by an ardent lover :

" There is the heavenly assenting smile | that first gave soul  
 and spirit to my hopes, | those are the lips which sealed a vow,  
 as yet | scarce dry in Cupid's calendar ! And there | the half-  
 resentful blush that would have checked | the ardour of my  
 thanks ! Well, all that's past ! " |

A similar principle of judgment may be applied to the appearance in prose of other elements of verse technique,

such as rime. When it is there by design it is legitimate (as in the sentence from Thackeray on page 92) ; its appearance by accident is a mark of careless writing.

## VIII

Just as a well-balanced variety of sentence-forms makes a piece of prose buoyant and readable, so does a well-blended variety of rhythms. In the following appendix of examples the student should consider also the harmony of sound and sense which has already been indicated as being the mark of the best prose. With one or two stated exceptions, these passages are workmanlike and utilitarian prose, and not the opulent and self-conscious cadences of rhetoric. In each example it will be found—and this is the outstanding virtue of the rhythm of serviceable prose—that the waves of rhythm carry along the sense in just such measures of sound as enable the meaning to be conveniently and completely absorbed. Each wave transmits as much of the import of the passage as can, in relation to its emphasis and value, be comprehended as a complete whole.

The finest rhythms, as we have observed, transmute prose into something only a little lower than poetry. The rhythmic grandeur of Raleigh and Donne and Carlyle and de Quincey and Newman belongs to the domain of rhetoric ; but, as a scrutiny of the following examples will demonstrate, the best plain prose is, no less certainly if rather less elaborately, also moulded by the quality of its cadences. Because the rhythm of serviceable prose is comparatively unobtrusive, its presence as a determinant of the satisfaction we derive from reading a passage is often unregarded. The earlier examples in the following collection of extracts display no virtuosity of rhythmic organization ; they lack that malleability and temper of prose which has been many times returned to the fire and beaten out again and again into elaborate and plastic shapes. But they stand the test of reading aloud : which is an approximate proof that, however simple the sentence-structure is, it yet affords scope for an adequate variety of wave-lengths and stresses. Most of these passages illustrate the axiom that sentences which are sound yet simple and varied in structure are pleasurable in rhythm. In prose as in other crafts, it will be found that what is well made proves to possess more than mere utility.



I. From Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*:

"As for Johnson,<sup>1</sup> to whose character I am now arrived, if we look upon him while he was himself (for his last plays were but his dotages), I think him the most learned and judicious writer which any theatre ever had. He was a most severe judge of himself, as well as others. One cannot say he wanted wit, but rather that he was frugal of it. In his works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit and language and humour also in some measure, we had before him; but something of art was wanting to the *Drama* till he came. He managed his strength to more advantage than any who preceded him. You seldom find him making love in any of his scenes, or endeavouring to move the passions; his genius was too sullen and saturnine to do it gracefully, especially when he knew he came after those who had performed both to such an height. Humour was his proper sphere; and in that he delighted most to represent mechanick people. He was deeply conversant in the ancients, both Greek and Latin, and he borrowed boldly from them: there is scarce a poet or historian among the Roman authors of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. But he has done his robberies so openly that one may see he fears not to be taxed by any law. He invades authors like a monarch; and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him. With the spoils of these writers he so represents old *Rome* to us, in its rites, ceremonies, and customs, that if one of their poets had written either of his tragedies we had seen less of it than in him. If there was any fault in his language 'twas that he weaved it too closely and laboriously in his serious plays: perhaps, too, he did a little too much Romanize our tongue, leaving the words which he translated almost as much Latin as he found them: wherein, though he learnedly followed the idiom of their language, he did not enough comply with ours. If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramattick poets; Johnson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare."

II. From Bates's *A Naturalist on the Amazons*:

"The heat increased rapidly towards two o'clock (92° and 93° Fahr.), by which time every voice of bird or mammal was hushed; only in the trees was heard at intervals the harsh whirr of a cicada. The leaves, which were so moist and fresh

<sup>1</sup> i.e. Ben Jonson.

in early morning, now became lax and drooping ; the flowers shed their petals. Our neighbours, the Indian and Mulatto inhabitants of the open palm-thatched huts, as we returned home fatigued with our ramble, were either asleep in their hammocks or seated on mats in the shade, too languid even to talk. On most days in June and July a heavy shower would fall some time in the afternoon, producing a most welcome coolness. The approach of the rain-clouds was after a uniform fashion, very interesting to observe. First, the cool sea-breeze, which commenced to blow about 10 o'clock, and-which had increased in force with the increasing power of the sun, would flag and finally die away. The heat and electric tension of the atmosphere would then become almost insupportable. Languor and uneasiness would seize on every one ; even the denizens of the forest betraying it by their motions. White clouds would appear in the east and gather into cumuli, with an increasing blackness along their lower portions. The whole eastern horizon would become almost suddenly black, and this would spread upwards, the sun at length becoming obscured. Then the rush of a mighty wind is heard through the forest, swaying the tree-tops ; a vivid flash of lightning bursts forth, then a crash of thunder, and down streams the deluging rain. Such storms soon cease, leaving bluish-black motionless clouds in the sky until night. Meantime all nature is refreshed ; but heaps of flower-petals and fallen leaves are seen under the trees. Towards evening life revives again, and the ringing uproar is resumed from bush and tree. The following morning the sun again rises in a cloudless sky, and so the cycle is completed ; spring, summer, and autumn, as it were, in one tropical day. . . .

In Europe, a woodland scene has its spring, its summer, its autumnal, and its winter aspects. In the equatorial forests the aspect is the same or nearly so every day in the year : budding, flowering, fruiting, and leaf-shedding are always going on in one species or other. The activity of birds and insects proceeds without interruption, each species having its own separate times ; the colonies of wasps, for instance, do not die off annually, leaving only the queens, as in cold climates ; but the succession of generations and colonies goes on incessantly. It is never either spring, summer, or autumn, but each day is a combination of all three. With the day and night always of equal length, the atmospheric disturbances of each day neutralising themselves before each succeeding morn ; with the sun in its course proceeding mid-way across the sky, and the daily temperature the same within two or three degrees throughout the year—how grand in its perfect equilibrium and simplicity is the march of Nature under the equator! "

III. And this, a fragment from a piece of perfect but unpretentious prose, is from Conrad's *Youth* :

"I need not tell you what it is to be knocking about in an open boat. I remember nights and days of calm, when we pulled, we pulled, and the boat seemed to stand still, as if bewitched within the circle of the sea horizon. I remember the heat, the deluge of rain-squalls that kept us baling for dear life (but filled our water-cask), and I remember sixteen hours on end with a mouth as dry as a cinder and a steering-oar over the stern to keep my first command head on to a breaking sea. I did not know how good a man I was till then. I remember the drawn faces, the dejected figures of my two men, and I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more—the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men ; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort—to death ; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires—and expires, too soon, too soon—before life itself.

And this is how I see the East. I have seen its secret places and have looked into its very soul ; but now I see it always from a small boat, a high outline of mountains, blue and afar in the morning ; like faint mist at noon ; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand, the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood, comes out of the still night—the first sign of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight.

We had been pulling this finishing spell for eleven hours. Two pulled, and he whose turn it was to rest sat at the tiller. We had made out the red light in that bay and steered for it, guessing it must mark some small coasting port. We passed two vessels, outlandish and high-sterned, sleeping at anchor, and, approaching the light, now very dim, ran the boat's nose against the end of a jutting wharf. We were blind with fatigue. My men dropped the oars and fell off the thwarts as if dead. I made fast to a pile. A current rippled softly. The scented obscurity of the shore was grouped into vast masses, a density of colossal clumps of vegetation, probably—mute and fantastic

shapes. And at their foot the semicircle of a beach gleamed faintly, like an illusion. There was not a light, not a stir, not a sound. The mysterious East faced me, perfumed like a flower, silent like death, dark like a grave."

IV. The ambitious beginner is tempted to believe that the best rhythm is the sonorous one: a heresy which leads to the composition of obscure and stodgy writing. This passage from Hazlitt's *Table Talk* is evidence that a short wave-length may still leave scope for variety of cadence. Here short sentences predominate, but they are of several degrees of shortness: in consequence the prose is plastic in rhythm:

"One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone.

'The fields his study, nature was his book.' I cannot see the wit of walking and talking at the same time. When I am in the country I wish to vegetate like the country. I am not for criticising hedge-rows and black cattle. I go out of town and all that is in it. There are those who for this purpose go to watering-places, and carry the metropolis with them. I like more elbow-room and fewer encumbrances. I like solitude, when I give myself up to it, for the sake of solitude; nor do I ask for

a friend in my retreat,  
Whom I may whisper solitude is sweet.

The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do, just as one pleases. We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. It is because I want a little breathing-space to muse on indifferent matters, where Contemplation

May plume her feathers and let grow her wings,  
That in the various bustle of resort  
Were all too ruffled, and sometimes impair'd,

that I absent myself from the town for a while, without feeling at a loss the moment I am left by myself. Instead of a friend in a postchaise or in a Tilbury, to exchange good things with, and vary the same stale topics over again, for once let me have a truce with impertinence. Give me the clear blue sky over my

head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner—and then to thinking ! It is hard if I cannot start some game on these lone heaths. I laugh, I run, I leap, I sing for joy. From the point of yonder rolling cloud I plunge into my past being, and revel there, as the sun-burnt Indian plunges headlong into the wave that wafts him to his native shore. Then long-forgotten things, like 'sunken wrack and sumless treasures,' burst upon my eager sight, and I begin to feel, think, and be myself again. Instead of an awkward silence, broken by attempts at wit or dull common-places, mine is that undisturbed silence of the heart which alone is perfect eloquence. No one likes puns, alliterations, antitheses, argument, and analysis better than I do ; but I sometimes had rather be without them. 'Leave, oh, leave me to my repose !' I have just now other business in hand, which would seem idle to you, but is with me 'very stuff o' the conscience.' Is not this wild rose sweet without a comment ? Does not this daisy leap to my heart set in its coat of emerald ? "

V. The preference for a short wave-length is very pronounced in Macaulay's work ; and his practice illustrates its perfect aptness for rapid descriptive or expository matter. This piece is from his account of the siege of Londonderry :

"It was the twenty-eighth of July. The sun had just set : the evening sermon in the cathedral was over ; and the heart-broken congregation had separated ; when the sentinels on the tower saw the sails of three vessels coming up the Foyle. Soon there was a stir in the Irish camp. The besiegers were on the alert for miles along both shores. The ships were in extreme peril : for the river was low ; and the only navigable channel ran very near to the left bank, where the headquarters of the enemy had been fixed, and where the batteries were most numerous. Leake performed his duty with a skill and spirit worthy of his noble profession, exposed his frigate to cover the merchantmen, and used his guns with great effect. At length the little squadron came to the place of peril. Then the *Mountjoy* took the lead, and went right at the boom. The huge barricade cracked and gave way : but the shock was such that the *Mountjoy* rebounded, and stuck in the mud. A yell of triumph rose from the banks : the Irish rushed to their boats, and were preparing to board ; but the *Dartmouth* poured on them a well-directed broadside, which threw them into disorder. Just then the *Phoenix* dashed at the breach which the *Mountjoy* had made, and was in a moment within the fence. Meantime

the tide was rising fast. The *Mountjoy* began to move, and soon passed safe through the broken stakes and floating spars. But her brave master was no more. A shot from one of the batteries had struck him ; and he died by the most enviable of all deaths, in sight of the city which was his birthplace, which was his home, and which had just been saved by his courage and self-devotion from the most frightful form of destruction. The night had closed in before the conflict at the boom began : but the flash of the guns was seen, and the noise heard by the lean and ghastly multitude which covered the walls of the city. When the *Mountjoy* grounded, and when the shout of triumph rose from the Irish on both sides of the river, the hearts of the besieged died within them. One who endured the unutterable anguish of that moment has told us that they looked fearfully livid in each other's eyes. Even after the barricade had been passed, there was a terrible half-hour of suspense. It was ten o'clock before the ships arrived at the quay. The whole population was there to welcome them. A screen made of casks filled with earth was hastily thrown up to protect the landing-place from the batteries on the other side of the river ; and then the work of unloading began. First were rolled on shore barrels containing six thousand bushels of meal. Then came great cheeses, casks of beef, fitches of bacon, kegs of butter, sacks of pease and biscuit, ankers of brandy. Not many hours before, half a pound of tallow and three quarters of a pound of salted hide had been weighed out with niggardly care to every fighting man. The ration which each now received was three pounds of flour, two pounds of beef, and a pint of pease. It is easy to imagine with what tears grace was said over the suppers of that evening. There was little sleep on either side of the wall. The bonfires shone bright along the whole circuit of the ramparts. The Irish guns continued to roar all night ; and all night the bells of the rescued city made answer to the Irish guns with a peal of joyous defiance. Through the three following days the batteries of the enemy continued to play. But, on the third night, flames were seen arising from the camp ; and, when the first of August dawned, a line of smoking ruins marked the site lately occupied by the huts of the besiegers ; and the citizens saw far off the long column of pikes and standards retreating up the left bank of the Foyle towards Strabane."

VI. This paragraph from Thackeray's *Roundabout Papers* again shows that simplicity of sentence-structure is quite consonant with flexibility of rhythm. The passage is very well modulated—until it reaches the last sentence, where the

weight of badly-packed subject-matter completely frustrates the final cadence :

" I have seldom seen a place more quaint, pretty, calm, and pastoral, than this remote little Chur. What need have the inhabitants for walls and ramparts, except to build summer-houses, to trail vines, and hang clothes to dry ? No enemies approach the great mouldering gates : only at morn and even, the cows come lowing past them, the village maidens chatter merrily round the fountains, and babble like the ever-voluble stream that flows under the old walls. The schoolboys, with book and satchel, in smart uniforms, march up to the gymnasium, and return thence at their stated time. There is one coffee-house in the town, and I see one old gentleman goes to it. There are shops with no customers seemingly, and the lazy tradesmen look out of their little windows at the single stranger sauntering by. There is a stall with baskets of queer little black grapes and apples, and a pretty brisk trade with half a dozen urchins standing round. But, beyond this, there is scarce any talk or movement in the street. There's *nobody* at the book shop. ' If you will have the goodness to come again in an hour,' says the banker, with his mouth full of dinner at one o'clock, ' you can have the money.' There is nobody at the hotel, *save the good landlady, the kind waiters, the brisk young cook who ministers to you.* Nobody is in the Protestant church — (oh ! strange sight, the two confessions are here at peace ! ) — nobody in the Catholic church : until the sacristan, from his snug abode in the cathedral close, espies the traveller eyeing the monsters and pillars before the old shark-toothed arch of his cathedral, and comes out (with a view to remuneration possibly) and opens the gate, and shows you the venerable church, and the queer old relics in the sacristy, and the ancient vestments (a black velvet cope, amongst other robes, as fresh as yesterday, and presented by that notorious ' pervert,' Henry of Navarre and France), and the statue of Saint Lucius, who built St. Peter's Church, opposite No. 65, Cornhill."

VII. This passage illustrates what was said about the variations of pace which may be induced in a piece of prose by a blend of long and short words. The long words extend the length of a wave, and the short ones curtail it. The extract is from Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* :

" To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a

few minutes of stillness, or by the better outlook upon space that a hill affords, or by the wind, or by the solitude ; but whatever be its origin the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are dreamwapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame."

VIII. This paragraph from Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* further illustrates the time-variation which is produced in a piece of prose by the mingling of long words and short. Attention may be drawn also to the perfect design of this paragraph, launched by a pithy sentence which summarizes what is to follow, and clinched by another epitomizing sentence :

" Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression : so that even in the desire and regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own ; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination ; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. The enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship, is essentially linked with such emotions ; and whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a universe. Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined organization, but they can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world ; a word, a trait in the representation of a scene or a passion, will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced these emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past. Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best



and most beautiful in the world ; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them, or in language or in form, sends them forth among mankind, bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide—abide, because there is no portal of expression from the caverns of the spirit which they inhabit into the universe of things. Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."

IX. The rhythms of the Authorised Version were devised in an age when cadence was more regarded than any other quality of prose. This familiar fragment reveals the chief sources of the beautiful rhythms which we so frequently encounter in the Bible: a mingling of long and short wavelenghts and a variation of stress which makes each sentence flexible and modulated. By comparing the original with a modernized version we may observe that latter-day divines are not so habitually sensitive to rhythm as their forbears were in 1611. In their zeal to clarify meanings the later paraphrasers twist and break the fragile rhythms of the Authorized Version: merely to make the Bible acceptable to those whose literary standards have been formed by Sunday newspapers or parish magazines.

(i) "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow ; they toil not, neither do they spin : and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

(ii) "Learn a lesson from the wild lilies. Watch their growth. They neither toil nor spin, and yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his magnificence could array himself like one of these."

X. Stevenson could write prose which was both notable in rhythm and powerful in pictorial suggestion. He could please the mind's eye and the ear simultaneously : There is an amplitude in his most usual cadences, a full flow of sound which swells towards the end of the sentence—particularly in the final sentences of a paragraph. This episode is from *Travels with a Donkey* :

"A faint wind, more like a moving coolness than a stream of air, passed down the glade from time to time ; so that even in my great chamber the air was being renewed all night long. I thought with horror of the inn at Chasseradès and the congregated night-caps ; with horror of the nocturnal prowesses of

clerks and students, of hot theatres and pass-keys and close rooms. I have not often enjoyed a more serene possession of myself, nor felt more independent of material aids. The outer world, from which we cower into our houses, seemed after all a gentle habitable place; and night after night a man's bed, it seemed, was laid and waiting for him in the fields, where God keeps an open house. I thought I had rediscovered one of those truths which are revealed to savages and hid from political economists: at the least, I had discovered a new pleasure for myself. And yet even while I was exulting in my solitude I became aware of a strange lack. I wished a companion, to lie near me in the starlight, silent and not moving, but ever within touch. For there is a fellowship more quiet even than solitude, and which, rightly understood, is solitude made perfect. And to live out of doors with the woman a man loves is of all lives the most complete and free.

As I thus lay, between content and longing, a faint noise stole towards me through the pines. I thought, at first, it was the crowing of cocks or the barking of dogs at some very distant farm; but steadily and gradually it took articulate shape in my ears, until I became aware that a passenger was going by upon the high-road in the valley, and singing loudly as he went. There was more of good-will than grace in his performance; but he trolled with ample lungs; and the sound of his voice took hold upon the hillside and set the air shaking in the leafy glens. I have heard people passing by night in sleeping cities; some of them sang; one, I remember, played loudly on the bagpipes. I have heard the rattle of a cart or carriage spring up suddenly after hours of stillness, and pass, for some minutes, within the range of my hearing as I lay abed. There is a romance about all who are abroad in the black hours, and with something of a thrill we try to guess their business. But here the romance was double: first, this glad passenger, lit internally with wine, who sent up his voice in music through the night; and then I, on the other hand, buckled into my sack, and smoking alone in the pine-woods between four and five thousand feet towards the stars."

XI. This paragraph from Andrew Lang's *Adventures among Books* concludes with the final swirling sentence which we have found to be popular with many writers; but it shows also how certain devices can modify the rhythm of a passage. In this example the modification is caused by the alliteration of "w," which slows down the movement of the words and compels us to linger on the idea which those words sustain. And, more than this, the reiterated "Oh" gives a

fine poise to the launching of each wave ; and the long vowel sounds reverberate slowly through the cadence of the sentences :

" Oh, moonlit night of Africa, and orchard by those wild seabanks where once Dido stood ; oh, laughter of boys among the shaken leaves, and sound of falling fruit ; how do you live alone out of so many nights that no man remembers ? For Carthage is destroyed, indeed, and forsaken of the sea, yet that one hour of summer is to be unforgotten while man has memory of the story of his past."

XII. Whatever Gibbon's prose may lack in warmth and natural grace, it is strong and flexible in rhythm ; and this extract will show that Gibbon's mastery of rhythm proceeds from the consistent variety of his sentence-forms and of his sentence-lengths :

" The generality of princes, if they were stripped of their purple and cast naked into the world, would immediately sink to the lowest rank of society, without a hope of emerging from their obscurity. But the personal merit of Julian was, in some measure, independent of his fortune. Whatever had been his choice of life, by the force of intrepid courage, lively wit, and intense application, he would have obtained, or at least he would have deserved, the highest honours of his profession, and Julian might have raised himself to the rank of minister or general of the state in which he was born a private citizen. If the jealous caprice of power had disappointed his expectations ; if he had prudently declined the paths of greatness, the employment of the same talents in studious solitude would have placed beyond the reach of kings his present happiness and his immortal fame. When we inspect with minute, or perhaps malevolent, attention, the portrait of Julian, something seems wanting to the grace and perfection of the whole figure. His genius was less powerful and sublime than that of Caesar, nor did he possess the consummate prudence of Augustus. The virtue of Trajan appears more steady and natural, and the philosophy of Marcus is more simple and consistent. Yet Julian sustained adversity with firmness, and prosperity with moderation. After an interval of one hundred and twenty years from the death of Alexander Severus, the Romans beheld an emperor who made no distinction between his duties and his pleasures, who laboured to relieve the distress and to revive the spirit of his subjects, and who endeavoured always to connect authority with merit, and happiness with virtue. Even faction, and

religious faction, was constrained to acknowledge the superiority of his genius in peace as well as in war, and to confess, with a sigh, that the apostate Julian was a lover of his country, and that he deserved the empire of the world."

XIII. Because of his incorrigible predilection for the long serpentine sentence, much of Ruskin's prose is invertebrate. But when he has his sentences under control he can achieve a very powerful rhythm. In this example the waves are very considerably varied; and the speed of the passage is modified by a continuous blend of polysyllabic words with short ones. Restrained effects of alliteration also contribute to the determination of the pace of the passage. It is taken from *Stones of Venice*.

"Through the heavy door whose bronze network closes the place of his rest, let us enter the church itself. It is lost in still deeper twilight, to which the eye must be accustomed for some moments before the form of the building can be traced; and then there opens before us a vast cave, hewn out into the form of a Cross, and divided into shadowy aisles by many pillars. Round the domes of its roof the light enters only through narrow apertures like large stars; and here and there a ray or two from some far away casement wanders into the darkness, and casts a narrow phosphoric stream upon the waves of marble that heave and fall in a thousand colours along the floor. What else there is of light is from torches, or silver lamps, burning ceaselessly in the recesses of the chapels; the roof sheeted with gold, and the polished walls covered with alabaster, give back, at every curve and angle, some feeble gleaming to the flames; and the glories round the heads of the sculptured saints flash out upon us as we pass them, and sink again into the gloom. Under foot and over head, a continual succession of crowded imagery, one picture passing into another, as in a dream; forms beautiful and terrible mixed together; dragons and serpents, and ravening beasts of prey, and graceful birds that in the midst of them drink from running fountains and feed from vases of crystal; the passions and the pleasures of human life symbolized together, and the mystery of its redemption; for the images of interwoven lines and changeful pictures lead always at last to the Cross, lifted and carved in every place and upon every stone; sometimes with the serpent of eternity wrapt round it, sometimes with doves beneath its arms, and sweet herbage growing forth from its feet; but conspicuous most of all on the great rood that crosses the church before the altar, raised in bright blazonry against the shadow of the apse.

And although in the recesses of the aisles and chapels, when the mist of the incense hangs heavily, we may see continually a figure traced in faint lines upon their marble, a woman standing with her eyes raised to heaven, and the inscription above her, 'Mother of God,' she is not here the presiding deity. It is the Cross that is first seen, and always, burning in the centre of the temple; and every dome and hollow of its roof has the figure of Christ in the utmost height of it, raised in power, or returning in judgment."

XIV. Of those devices which exercise such a subtle control over the cadence of a passage there are some further examples in this passage from C. M. Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*. The blend of long and short words gives rhythmical as well as verbal relief, the studied manipulation of vowels is manifest in such phrases as "the ears tingle . . . shrillness"; and alliteration is employed as a brake in the phrases "the lingering day draws down to the sun-setting"; and "the morrow will be as this day, days deadly drowned in the sun of the summer wilderness":

"The summer's night at end, the sun stands up as a crown of hostile flames from that huge covert of inhospitable sandstone bergs; the desert day dawns not little and little, but it is noontide in an hour. The sun, entering as a tyrant upon the waste landscape, darts upon us a torment of fiery beams, not to be remitted till the far-off evening.—No matins here of birds; not a rock partridge-cock, calling with blithesome chuckle over the extreme waterless desolation. Grave is that giddy heat upon the crown of the head; the ears tingle with a flickering shrillness, a subtle crepitation it seems, in the glassiness of this sun-stricken nature: the hot sand-blink is in the eyes, and there is little refreshment to find in the tents' shelter; the worsted booths leak to this fiery rain of sunny light. Mountains looming like dry bones through the thin air, stand far around about us: the savage flank of Yabba Moghrair, the high spire and ruinous stacks of el-Jebâl, Chebâd, the coast of Helwân! Herds of weak nomad camels waver dispersedly, seeking pasture in the midst of this hollow fainting country, where but lately the swarming locusts have fretted every green thing. This silent air burning about us, we endure breathless till the assr: when the dazing Arabs in the tents revive after their heavy hours. The lingering day draws down to the sun-setting; the herdsmen, weary of the sun, come again with the cattle, to taste in their menzils the first sweetness of mirth and repose.—The day is done, and there rises the nightly freshness of this

purest mountain air : and then to the cheerful song and the cup at the common fire. The moon rises ruddy from that solemn obscurity of jebel like a mighty beacon :—and the morrow will be as this day, days deadlly drowned in the sun of the summer wilderness."

XV. This piece, from de Quincey, shares with the last passage a fertility of artifice which we do not look for in merely serviceable prose. But such passages are worth consideration on the ground, alone, that they show that prose in its finest flights is as self-conscious as the greatest poetry ; and although de Quincey and Doughty are inimitable in their elaborate contrivance, they may remind the merely utilitarian writer that it is admissible for him to employ deliberate devices in the accomplishment of felicitous rhythms. Finally, their work will serve as a salutary reminder that there must perpetually remain an impassable gulf between the product of the master craftsman and that of the competent journeyman :

" So sweet, so ghostly, in its soft, golden smiles, silent as a dream, and quiet as the dying trance of a saint, faded through all its stages this departing day, along the whole length of which I bade farewell for many a year to Wales, and farewell to summer. In the very aspect and the sepulchral stillness of the motionless day, as solemnly it wore away through morning, noontide, afternoon, to meet the darkness that was hurrying to swallow up its beauty, I had a fantastic feeling as though I read the very language of resignation when bending before some irresistible agency. And at intervals I heard—in how different a key!—the raving, the everlasting uproar of that dreadful metropolis, which at every step was coming nearer, and beckoning (as it seemed) to myself for purposes as dim, for issues as incalculable, as the path of cannon-shots fired at random and in darkness.

For nearly two hours I had heard fierce winds arising, and the whole atmosphere had by this time become one vast laboratory of hostile movements in all directions. Such a chaos, such a distracting wilderness of dim sights and of those awful ' sounds that live in darkness,' never had I consciously witnessed. Rightly, and by a true instinct, had I made my farewell adieus to summer. All through the day, Wales and her grand mountain ranges—Penmaenmawr, Snowdon, Cader Idris—had divided my thoughts with London. But now rose

London, sole, dark, infinite, brooding over the whole capacities of my heart. Other object, other thought, I could not admit. Long before midnight the whole household (with the exception of a solitary waiter) had retired to rest. Two hours, at least, were left to me, after twelve o'clock had struck, for heart-shaking reflections. . . . The unusual dimensions of the rooms, especially their towering height, brought up continually and obstinately, through natural links of associated feelings or images, the mighty vision of London waiting for me afar off. An altitude of nineteen or twenty feet showed itself unavoidably upon an exaggerated scale in some of the smaller side-rooms, meant probably for cards or refreshments. This single feature of the rooms, their unusual altitude, and the echoing hollowness which had become the exponent of that altitude, this one terrific feature (for terrific it was in the effect), together with crowding and evanescent images of the flying feet that so often had spread gladness through these halls on the wings of youth and hope at seasons when every room rang with music ; all this, rising in tumultuous vision, whilst the dead hours of night were stealing along, all around me, household and town, sleeping, and whilst against the windows more and more the storm outside was raving, and to all appearances endlessly growing, threw me into the deadliest condition of nervous emotion under contradictory forces, high over which predominated horror recoiling from that unfathomed abyss in London into which I was now so wilfully precipitating myself."

XVI. In pronounced contrast to these sophisticated periods is this simple and beautiful passage from Bunyan. It manifests the power of the spontaneous as against the charm of the deliberate. This unconscious perfection appears a hundred times in the natural perfection of the Authorized Version, and the same natural aptitude is apparent in this familiar paragraph from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as memorable for its cadence as for its concreteness. The richness of the subject-matter and the intensity of feeling which glows behind it beget a rhythm which is as moving as anything which artifice could contrive :

" After this, it was noised abroad that Mr. *Valiant-for-truth* was taken with a summons, by the same *Post* as the other, and had this for a token that the summons was true, *That his Pitcher was broken at the Fountain*. When he understood it, he called for his friends, and told them of it. Then said he, I am going to my fathers, and though with great difficulty I am got hither,

yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. *My Sword*, I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my *Courage and Skill*, to him that can get it. *My Marks and Scars* I carry with me, to be a Witness for me, that I have fought his battles who now will be my rewarder. When the day that he must go hence, was come, many accompanied him to the river side, into which, as he went, he said, *Death, where is thy Sting?* And as he went down deeper, he said, *Grave, where is thy Victory?* So he passed over, and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

## IX

From what has been said in this chapter it may be assumed that prose which is defective in rhythm is invariably poor prose; but such an assumption, justified as it is by the English prose tradition, must be qualified in respect of certain modern experimental prose. Some contemporary writers eager to carry prose development forward into unexplored territory deliberately reject the customary rhythmic forms of prose, and throw a new emphasis on to words. In this sense: that they sacrifice cadences to the prime business of selecting words so graphic and stimulating as to occupy the reader solely with their significance and suggestion. The stress is not upon the order and organization of words into rhythms but upon their sheer quality of evocation as symbols. The theory which produces this practice is, briefly, that rhythm, has become a customary suit of expression, and that its familiarity of pattern robs words of the significance they ought to carry. Rhythm is a narcotic which leaves the reader no more than partly conscious of the *meanings* of words. Therefore break the conventional forms, and, by deliberately abandoning them, enable words to resume their lost potency. It is a theory which has much justification, and which, in the passage of time, may become a dogma.

In its extremest forms it is manifested in the prose of Mr. James Joyce; more moderately it is applied in the prose of such powerful writers as Mr. Sherwood Anderson and Mr. Sinclair Lewis. Their sentence-forms are plain and free from any elaboration of rhythm; they are not devised for reading aloud. But their diction is very self-conscious, and is deliberately chosen so as to convey intense impressions to the reader's imagination. Yet again it appears to be implicit in



much of the work of Mr. D. H. Lawrence, Mr. Aldous Huxley, and Mr. William Gerhardi. All of these can and do write rhythmic prose; but all of them can and do write also a form of prose which appears intentionally to avoid any attractiveness of cadence and to be concerned primarily with the communication of vivid pictorial impressions. For this absence of rhythmic grace they substitute an exceptionally strong selectiveness of diction; so that we enjoy their prose primarily because it is full of potent images and suggestive epithets. Briefly, they make their appeal by projecting pictures on to the screen of the reader's consciousness rather than by luring him with some dying fall of cadence. And in an age when reading must inevitably become more and more a silent ritual this change of appeal conforms to the general need.

This extract from Mr. D. H. Lawrence's impressions of Sicily makes it perfectly plain that the writer is not here attempting to create cadences; although the force of a phrase may sometimes spontaneously produce a swirl of rhythm—such as "like angels in and out. . . ." All his art is directed to the purpose of projecting rapid and vivid impressions upon the consciousness of the reader. This kind of prose suggests the analogy to the art of those painters, such as Van Gogh, who neglect form for the sake of colour.

"Up and down, up and down go a pair of officials. The young one in a black gold-laced cap talks to the elder in a scarlet gold-laced cap. And he walks, the young one, with a mad little hop, and his fingers fly as if he wanted to scatter them to the four winds of heaven, and his words go off like fireworks, with more than Sicilian speed. On and on, up and down, and his eye is dark and excited and unseeing, like the eye of a fleeing rabbit. Strange and beside itself is humanity.

What a lot of officials! You know them by their caps. Elegant tubby little officials in kid and patent boots and gold-laced caps, like angels in and out of the gates of heaven they thread in and out of the various doors. As far as I can see, there are three scarlet station-masters, five black-and-gold sub-stationmasters, and a countless number of principalities and powers in more or less broken boots and official caps. They are like bees round a hive, humming in an important *conversazione*, and occasionally looking at some paper or other, and extracting a little official honey. But the *conversazione* is . . . of affairs. To an Italian official, life seems to be one

long and animated conversation—the Italian word is better—interrupted by casual trains and telephones. And besides the angels of heaven's gates, there are the mere ministers, porters, lamp cleaners, etc. These stand in groups and talk Socialism. A lamp man slashes along, swinging a couple of lamps. Bashes one against a barrow. Smash goes the glass. Looks down as if to say, What do you mean by it? Glances over his shoulder to see if any member of the higher hierarchies is looking. Seven members of the higher hierarchies are assiduously not looking. On goes the minister with the lamp, blithely. Another pane or two gone. *Vogue la galère.*

Passengers have gathered again, some in hoods, some in nothing. Youths in thin paltry clothes stand out in the pouring rain as if they did not know it was raining. One sees their coat-shoulders soaked. And yet they do not trouble to keep under shelter. Two large station dogs run about and trot through the standing trains, just like officials. They climb up the footboard, hop into a train and hop out casually when they feel like it. Two or three port-porters, in canvas hats as big as umbrellas, literally, spreading like huge fins over their shoulders, are looking into more empty trains. More and more people appear. More and more official caps stand about. It rains and rains. The train for Palermo and the train for Syracuse are both an hour late already, coming from the port. Fleabite. . . . Loose locomotives trundle back and forth, vaguely, like black dogs running and turning back. The port is only four minutes' walk. If it were not raining so hard, we would go down, walk along the lines and get into the waiting train down there. Anybody may please himself. There is the funnel of the great unwieldy ferry-object—she is just edging in. That means the connection from the mainland at last."

## CHAPTER VI

### DICTION

#### I

**I**N earlier chapters attention has been more than once directed to certain persistent defects in early English prose: such as its habitually undisciplined sentence-formation, and the ambiguities due to slipshod grammar. These blemishes are at once apparent in most English prose written before the seventeenth century. Yet no one can read this early prose without taking pleasure in its vigour and its suggestiveness. The attraction which so completely compensates for the cumbersome sentences and the dishevelled syntax is the richness of its diction. A reader can derive *continuous* pleasure only from that prose which is lucid in meaning and well-organized in form; but he can derive a sporadic satisfaction, perhaps even greater in quality, from ill-constructed sentences which are studded with stimulating epithets. The command of a vivid vocabulary and the command of sentence-structure are not necessarily complementary. Many a grammatical pedant can construct an immaculate sentence which fades immediately from the mind of the reader; whereas a sentence which can make no claim to perfection of structure may leave a lingering afterglow. The first example is correct, well-turned, and perhaps more than adequate, but it lacks any word or phrase which might kindle it and make it memorable:—"His indifference to the claims of filial obedience is amply demonstrated in the record of his early life; but there is unanimity of opinion that, in later years, the Dauphin manifested every token of a deep sense of his responsibilities as the father of a wayward son!"

The second sentence is ragged and clumsy in form, but it is vivified by the rich pictorial suggestion of such phrases as those which are here italicised: "And when the letter was

written word by word like as she devised, then she prayed her father that she might be watched until she were dead: and *while my body is hot* let this letter be put in my right hand, and my hand bound fast with the letter *until that I be cold*, and let me be put *in a fair bed* with all the richest clothes that I have about me, and so let my bed and all my richest clothes be laid with me in a *chariot* unto the next place where Thames is, and there let me be put within a *barge*, and but one man with me, such as ye trust to steer me thither, and that my barge be covered *with black samite* over and over!"

The first fails, where the second succeeds, because it lacks any single word which can conjure out of thin air a coloured and durable image. To use an analogy which is no more conclusive than any other of its kind: we might usefully consider diction as the colour element of a sentence, and the structure of a sentence as its form or shape.

Early prose is rich in colour but poor in form; and colour even without the complement of form can, in literature as in painting, give intense satisfaction. So richly satisfying can colour be, in Malory for example, that an apprentice prose-hand may be inclined to grumble that, not until he has painfully learned the necessity of accurate form, is he told that by cultivating a zest for epithet and an eye for the characterizing verb he may compose a sentence which will give more pleasure than a neat, unified, and well-turned sentence. But the information has been withheld for his own ultimate good. The beginner who follows the popular method of ransacking the paint-boxes of the early masters for vivid epithets and phrases will presently find that colour is not fully effective until it is dominated and restrained by form; and further, that notably good colour has a habit of emphasizing, by contrast, the weakness of poor form. There is to be considered also the circumstance that evolution has affected prose standards just as it has affected our views about dress and sanitation and town-planning and theories of government. A bit of antique pottery, ill-contrived in shape but barbarically beautiful in colour, is not considered a sound model for the production of Doulton ware. Its intrinsic beauty may be studied and copied—but only in a better form of design. Similarly, the fact that a bit of early prose is rich in diction does not make it an adequate model for reproduction in the twentieth century, when we require of prose that

it should not only be vivid in phrase and epithet, but clear in meaning and supple in construction.

## II

Insidid and colourless prose is very commonly the result of an indiscriminating choice of words: a weakness which may quite well accompany perfect accuracy in the manipulation of sentence-parts. The radical cause of this defect lies in a widespread failure to recognize that words have more elements than that of meaning. Most people consider words as mere beasts of burden, intended only to bear the weight of meaning, and serving no other than this strictly utilitarian purpose. This habit of thought engenders consequences similar to those which would befall a worker in mosaics who attempted to make patterns by attending only to the shapes of his cubes and not at all to their colours.

When a choice of words is being made, three qualities have to be considered, in this order of importance: Meaning, Atmosphere or Suggestion, and Sound. In poetry the meaning of words is not necessarily a first consideration, but in prose it most decidedly is. It is evident that, in practice, most people have a comparatively scanty wardrobe of small-clothes in which they dress whatever thoughts they have; and that they are compelled to send out their ideas clad in makeshift and ill-fitting terms which were never made to measure. Instead of language being the graceful vesture of thought it is most commonly a garment which fails to cover the full meaning in the writer's mind, or else which is too clumsy and full-bottomed to make that easy fit which we admire in graceful prose.

Accuracy of meaning is dependent upon the writer's possession of an adequate stock of words; and the collection of a representative and diversified vocabulary is as arduous and prolonged an undertaking as the acquisition of a good collection of postage stamps or old china or butterflies. There are, of course, means by which a ready-made collection can be got; but the man who owns a cabinet of butterflies merely by purchase or by inheritance lacks both the authority and the enthusiasm of the patient and zealous connoisseur. The usefulness of a dictionary or of a thesaurus of phrases is limited; and reliance upon dictionary definitions may lead

to a downright misuse of words. The connotation of a word can be properly appreciated only when it is discovered in a context, where its peculiar shade and quality of meaning are manifested. Certain mechanical devices for consolidating the verbal acquisitions which one makes in reading are sometimes recommended : such as the practice of making lists of nouns and verbs which have been encountered for the first time ; or again, the practice already indicated, of prospecting for verbal nuggets in the rich linguistic lodes of the Bible and Shakespeare and the English classics. The discoveries are catalogued and preserved to be incorporated (without even the recognition of quotation marks) in the prospector's own writing. Such routine exercises as these have something to be said for them : they subject a young writer to that discipline which the meanest practice of any art demands of its devotees ; they make the job of writing a conscious craft ; and they manifestly do extend his vocabulary. But such a deliberate policy of self-improvement cannot be universally recommended. The function of a great book is not to serve as materials for composition ; and the habit of reading for profit instead of for pleasure may undermine one's susceptibility to good prose. The formal study of literature for the good it may do to one's own style is for an intelligent person not necessary. Little good will be derived from reading one of the English classics if the reader insists on keeping close at hand a note book into which he will jot each new expressive word or arresting phrase. It is by a less formal process that the reading will extend his knowledge of the range of the language : by a process of unconscious assimilation and retention. What is essential is that reading be done attentively and leisurely ; if the mental attitude is one of alertness and receptivity the books will speak for themselves.

There is a very simple test by which the reader may periodically ascertain the extent and the quality of his vocabulary. It is an exercise which serves as a kind of spring cleaning, for it produces from the forgotten lumber-rooms of the mind words which through disuse are beginning to suffer from the ravages of neglect and decay, and burnishes them up into fitness again. The procedure is to make a list of scenes and objects and ideas, and to write down opposite each all those words, whether nouns or verbs or adjectives or adverbs, which might be applied to them. What words, for example, are

evoked by such stimuli as these : The sound of a March wind in the trees ; a fat man hurrying on a hot day ; the emotion of fear ; the flight of a flock of wild geese ; the glitter of shop windows on Christmas eve ?

The most casual study of any of the big dictionaries demonstrates how much potent and expressive English diction is being allowed to tarnish and perish in these mausoleums of the language. It is true that modern idiom is adding hundreds of effective words to the national vocabulary ; but on the other hand hundreds of beautiful terms which were common speech in Elizabethan times live nowhere now but in the Works of Shakespeare. And oblivion has claimed nearly all those vivid " nouns of multitude " which discerning word-makers invented hundreds of years ago when the vocabulary was smaller but certainly more discriminating : such as *a muster of peacocks, a congregation of plovers, a state of princes, a knot of witches, a skulk of foxes, a clutch of kittens, a dignity of canons, a disguising of tailors, a labour of moles, a melody of minstrels, and the probably apocryphal draught of butlers, and gabble of wives*. The preservation of national monuments has in our time become an approved public policy. The preservation of the national inheritance of language should appeal no less forcibly to those who venerate this England for the subtler and less obtrusive kind of patriotic reason. And this rehabilitation of national speech costs nothing but devotion ; and is perfectly compatible with that other process, of extension and coinage, which keeps the language plastic and adaptable to the claims of developing civilization.

Another valuable means of extending one's vocabulary is that of compiling lists of synonyms (and antonyms) ; a practice whose particular merit is that it directs the student's attention to the shades of meaning and of atmosphere in words which are approximately alike. Here the aid of a thesaurus is invaluable. Such a reference-book should be regarded as more than a temporary source of relief for a harassed writer whose sole concern is to avoid the repetition of worn-out words, or who is trying to find a word with which he can label an attribute or an action which he has only half grasped himself. A thesaurus should not be reserved merely for these first-aid emergencies ; it is most profitably employed when the reader is in a reflective mood, when he can lay out in a row, and scrutinise, such a group as : *to say, to declare,*

to maintain, to assert, to state, to asseverate ; or such a group of nouns as : *ghost, wraith, spirit, visitation, spook, spectre, apparition* ; or : *error, fault, sin, lapse, blunder, mistake* ; or *temperament, character, personality, nature, individuality* ; or of adjectives : *evil, wicked, sinful, depraved, vile, malignant* ; or : *proud, conceited, arrogant, vain, haughty* ; or : *obese, fat, adipose, stout, corpulent*. In this reflective mood the slight variation between these words, in meaning and in suggestion, may be profitably considered ; and such patient consideration will compel the student to try each word in a series of contexts until he finds the word which in shape and in colour fits exactly into its place in the mosaic of a sentence. The reward of such a patient sense of discrimination is the satisfaction to be derived from finding a deeper significance in literature than that which is vouchsafed to the less susceptible reader ; of discovering, for instance, the punctilious artistry of the translator who wrote : " Their young men shall see visions, and their old men shall dream dreams " ; where *vision* connotes that El Dorado which beckons to ardent youth, and *dream* means that haven of memories where the disillusioned old men take refuge from the rigours and asperities of action.

This reaction to the shade of difference which exists between so-called synonyms emerges from a deeper study than that of dictionaries ; it is derived only from the study of literature, from the study of the practice of the accomplished masters. Words whose abstract root-meanings are identical have, by literary association, come to express very separate shades of meaning. The Latin derivation of *compassion* is synonymous with the Greek derivation of *sympathy* ; but the practice of English literature has determined very different meanings for each of the two. The pursuit of the absolute synonym is a vain chase, although one does encounter rarely a group of true synonyms such as *eulogy, panegyric, encomium*. The finesse of meaning between approximate synonyms is constantly being developed. A Cabinet minister, for example, recently objected with great warmth to being called " The tool of the Federation of British Industries " ; but his wrath was appeased and his honour satisfied by the substitution of " The instrument of the Federation of British Industries." The reference-books could not save a writer from the very incongruous word used in the following sentence ; but a susceptibility to the value which the word has come to have



in literature would have saved him. The novelist is describing a scene in a plague hospital: "There lay a beautiful girl in coma on the edge of death, her tongue black, and round her the *scent* of the tomb." How much more certain in his touch is the chronicler of the New Testament who knew that there were occasions when not to mince words: "Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he *stinketh*: for he hath been dead four days." This squeamishness was not characteristic of the golden age of English literature, and is happily breaking down in our own.

Despite the authority of a dictionary definition, a word may, by the sheer force of popular usage, develop a significance quite other than its original one. The word *chronic*, for example, really means "of long standing," but the word is commonly used to describe, say, a pain which, without being of long standing, is simply severe. Public opinion may eventually standardize such a mistake: a process of evolution which is a salutary reminder that words (like grammar) were made for man and are invested with none of the absolute authority of a law brought down from Sinai. Other changes from an original signification have less fortuity than this incipient metamorphosis of *chronic*. When a mistake manages, in the course of time, to secure the endorsement of writers of repute, it is beyond challenge. Thus the final syllable of *poulterer* is a mistake which simply chanced to be copied and endorsed so long in the work of reputable writers as to become the standard word. Similarly *broad-casted* is likely to become the approved substitute for *broadcast*. The plea that the participle is formed from the noun and not from the verb seems merely a forced attempt to justify what public opinion has decided upon anyhow.<sup>1</sup> Popular usage may trim away from a word all but one of its connotations, and so restrict the meaning of the word. Thus the word *philosophical* has come to mean *patient*, since the most discernible characteristic of the philosopher is his capacity to conceal his emotions beneath an inscrutable expression. The word *amateur* in one of its meanings, has a connotation which curiously contradicts its radical meaning. An *amateur* means a *lover*, and so, by transference, an *enthusiast*; and in this sense is applied to one who engages

<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in Tract 19 of the Society for Pure English (Clarendon Press, 1925).

in sport, play-acting, bug-hunting, criminal investigation, or what not, not because he is paid to do it, but simply because he wants to do it. He does the thing because he loves doing it; and the description *amateur* is therefore laudatory. But this meaning has, in popular usage, been given a curious twist; so that we speak of some one's *amateurish* acting when we mean that the job has been badly done. The word has, in this sense, become the antonym to *professional*, and signifies a lack of that dexterity and finish which is possessed by the person who is paid to perform, and which enthusiasm alone cannot command. The designation *amateur* is, therefore, no longer to be relied upon as invariably, or even probably, a favourable one. The development of this secondary meaning is perfectly intelligible, and illustrates how necessary such developments are to keep pace with the continual evolution of new conceptions. The keen dilettante in a highly-specialized age must generally be a more imperfect performer than the man whose daily professional occupation it is to make himself perfect as a batsman or matador or grand opera tenor.

## III

Whatever the means he may adopt to acquire it, the writer cannot be expressive until he possesses a stock of words sufficient to enable him to pick out the word which exactly states his meaning. In a previous chapter it was shown that lucidity is dependent not alone upon exact grammar and accurate construction of sentences, but upon the elimination of any possible cause of ambiguity. That confusion of two meanings which we call ambiguity is often apparent in the misuse of terms by those whose stock of words is not big enough to ensure every time the selection of a word which is precise in meaning. It must be admitted that the English language allows uncommon scope for the misuse of words, for it accords to much of its extensive vocabulary an elasticity of meaning which is not altogether conducive to accuracy. French has a smaller vocabulary than English, but it has this compensating advantage: that the meanings of French words are more constant and definitive. French prose may lack something of the elusive flavour of English prose, but in meaning it is immaculate. This tradition of standardization has not been practised in English: and the result is a more

plastic and expressive, but a less precise diction. Here and there one of the English masters has made an attempt to establish definitive meanings for certain words ; but not even Milton's meticulous care could prevent the pressure of ignorant or perverse public opinion from transforming original meanings into acquired ones. Nor need we pretend that such a standardization would have been good for the language

At this time of day it would be pedantic as well as useless to attempt in the face of popular usage to practise Miltonic accuracy in the use of certain terms ; yet a study of his stringent exactitude has another kind of value for the modern student of language. For it demonstrates the truth that generations of use may obliterate the meaning which a word had when it was first borrowed from the classics to eke out a national vocabulary which was being found to be too scanty for a developing general consciousness. In Milton's diction we rediscover forgotten, overlaid meanings, as an archæologist, by scraping the whitewash off a brick wall, discovers the beauty of a lost fresco. Thus we are reminded of the primary meaning of *inane* as *empty space*, and can readily trace its transference to *empty* or *vacant*. We find the lost meaning of *monstrous*—inhabited by monsters ; of *buxom*—obedient ; of *impediment*—baggage ; of *obvious hill*—a hill which blocks the way ; of *kindly*—natural ; of *obsequious*—obedient ; of *sentence*—opinion ; of *purchase*—as derived from *purchasser* and meaning that which is stolen ; of *exquisite*—far sought ; of *puny*—later born (*puns nē*) ; of *to manure*—to till. And Ruskin has shown how the exact definitions of Milton's usage enabled him to write exactly what he meant, and not to take three pot shots at his meaning when he wrote of those who

for their bellies' sake  
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold. . . .

For those who deal in words this bypath of etymological research is one of the most instructive supplementary studies ; and as a purely disinterested study there is an unexpected romantic appeal in this recovery of neglected meanings from beneath the discoloration of daily use.

The English habit has been generally against any rigour of definition in its vocabulary—as a comparison of any dozen dictionaries will show, and as thousands of cross-word puzzle competitors have discovered. But this laxity of definition is

balanced by the ready adaptability of English terms. The English tradition has always been that words existed to serve the needs of English men and not that they were a sacred inheritance which no emergency must dare to modify. It has in practice rejected the theory that a word has a fixed and absolute meaning; and the history of the English language is a chronicle of the little revolutions by which necessity or caprice has transformed words from their original significations. Sometimes the transformation has been due to the metaphorical use of a word, for every mellow language is abundant in metaphor. In the vocabulary of everyday speech there are literally thousands of words which are strictly metaphorical modifications of original meanings. We say: "I see your point," or "I follow you," meaning "I understand"; and the vivid American diction carries metaphor a stage further by saying: "Snow again: I didn't catch your drift." The primary meaning of *sinister* is *left*; and we have adapted its meaning metaphorically in such phrases as "a sinister action." *Dexter* is Latin for *on the right hand*, and metaphor makes our word *dexterity* (right-handedness) mean *skill*. Similarly, the primary meaning of *eccentric* is applied to an enclosed series of circles which do not each move round a common centre. By metaphorical transference the word is now applied to a person whose actions have no fixed and reliable centre of control. *To abominate* is another figurative expression: it represents a man turning in disgust from an evil omen. *Supercilious* denotes one who has the habit of raising his eyebrows (*supercilium*). *Cancel* is metaphorical, for it is derived from the Latin *cancelli*, a *trellis* or *lattice*; and when we cancel a document we cross it out with strokes which look like a trellis. An *obvious* reason is one which stands right in your way, and so is unmistakable; whereas an *obscure* one is one which stands hidden in the shadows. In a literal sense we *imbibe* strong potations; but in the metaphorical sense we *imbibe* or *drink in* wisdom. We *ventilate* a grievance in the sense that we allow the fresh air of discussion to blow through it. Metaphorical also is the word *current* in such a phrase as *current topics*: matters which are now flowing through the public's attention. We *ferret* out the truth as the ferret finds his way through the intricacies of a rabbit-warren. And by an excessive metaphorical transference we designate a leading actor a *star*.

The word *transpire* was once a vigorous metaphor: to leak out; but cheap journalism has drained away all its significance. The fact that the original meaning of *zest* was a slice of lemon used for flavouring a drink makes the modern metaphorical use of the word very apt: *zest* is a flavour of conduct, that which gives a bite or a tang to behaviour.

The evolution of a secondary meaning for certain words extends the vocabulary; but the practice has also some unfortunate consequences. *Pen*, for example, may mean literature as well as an implement for writing it, as in the tag "The Pen is mightier than the Sword." Such words as this, which call a thing by the name of something of which it is a part or with which it is associated, are called metonyms. Their number is comparatively few, and these few are so overworked as to be merely clichés, and therefore distasteful to any sensitive writer. The poorer kind of journalism feeds on metonym: "Downing Street has declared . . .", "He was addicted to the bottle . . .", "The Dean of Chichester will soon be wearing the lawn sleeves . . .", "At forty-four Hobbs retains all his old skill with the willow." Such phrases have, it is true, the merit of concreteness; but in so far as metonyms are not spontaneously coined for the more graphic expression of an idea, but are rather stereotyped metaphors, ready-made for all occasions, they should be shunned by all self-respecting writers.

Adaptation and transference and caprice have kept the English vocabulary adequate and resourceful: a condition which is excellently described in these words of the late Sir Walter Raleigh. He is contrasting the habitual easygoing interpretation of meanings which the men of letters allow themselves with the rigorous habit of the men of science who love to coin words of exact meaning but forbidding aspect: "Words must change to live, and a word once fixed becomes useless for the purposes of art. Whosoever would make acquaintance with the goal towards which the classic practice tends should seek it in the vocabulary of the sciences. There words are fixed and dead, a botanical collection of colourless, scentless, dried weeds, a *hortus siccus* of proper names, each individual symbol poorly tethered to some single object or idea. No wind blows through that garden, and no sun shines on it, to discompose the melancholy workers at their task of tying Latin labels on to withered sticks."

Not only by metaphor has the English vocabulary been reinforced and modified, but (again on the implicit principle that words are made for man) by coinage, by colloquialism, and by the anglicisation of foreign words. The products of coinage constantly reveal the utilitarian basis of their origin : as *milliner* for one who deals in Milan ware, or *currants* as fruit from Corinth. English is the most liberal and generous of tongues, and it has never put up a tariff wall against the importation of words into the language. The extension of vocabulary due to the relations of the English, in war, art, and commerce, with nations as far afield as Hindustan and Cathay manifests the persistent desire of the English to make their speech the fluent expression of the ubiquitous and lively interests of the English mind.

The readiness of the English ever to adopt and to adapt foreign terms naturally increases the liability which has been already mentioned of the diction of daily use to lapse into inaccuracy or ambiguity. But these difficulties are not insuperable. The absence of standardization which makes it possible for such a word as *courage* or *virtuous* to have half a dozen meanings is being rectified by the authority of *The Oxford Dictionary*. And in practice the intelligent student will easily be able to minimize the liability of inaccuracy in meaning. The contextual study of synonyms ; the avoidance of words of dubious meaning (easy enough in a vocabulary so large as the English one) ; the use of a reputable dictionary ; the observance of the change in meanings which the best modern authors countenance : these are the principles which should enable him to find for his work words which fulfil the first of their three functions—that they should be adequate and accurate in meaning.

#### IV

#### ATMOSPHERE

The second of the three qualities with which words are endowed is only approximately described by the term *atmosphere*. What is meant is, that many words—by no means all—have a peculiarly powerful quality of evocation ; that, by association and suggestion, their mere meaning is reinforced by an impalpable glamour. Most words have, in the wear and tear of daily common use, lost this savour of

suggestiveness; and the only consideration which governs our choice of them is that they should exactly express the meanings we have in mind when we write. Such words, in atmosphere, may be called *neutral*. But there are other words which by the strength of their associations retain their glamour and stimulus; and these are for the most part words which have been hallowed by their use in great poetry, in Shakespeare, in the Bible. Alpha of the Plough discerningly points out that the magic of such words "is not in the words themselves, but in the distinction, delicacy, and surprise of their use." They appear unexpectedly in a sentence, charged with an electric potency, and their significance vibrates through the sentence and leaves an afterglow which persists long after the plain meaning of the words has been absorbed—and forgotten. Prose inherits the glamour of words which have illuminated great poetry, and by their reflected radiance rekindles something of the ecstasy we derive from the poet's inspired choice of epithets. A full appreciation of the best prose must inevitably be denied to those who do not know the great poets, for such people cannot share the associations which these sanctified words reawaken in those who can trace their potency to its certain source in the heights of poetry. Not all these memorable words take their secret strength from the uses of poetry; but all of them, whether they appeal because of their hint of faery lands forlorn or because of their onomatopoeic value, or because, like dialect words, they are full of the tang of the soil—or because of their metaphorical inner gleam—all of them in one way or another derive their potency from the strength of association; because, in brief, words are something more than mere symbols of meaning.

It is not the function of such a book as this to attempt to account for the aura with which so many English words are invested; but such a study could evidently be a most charming bypath of philology: An Essay in the Higher Criticism of Etymology; or, for more popular consumption, How Words Get Their Haloes. The suggestive flavour may be due to one of so many alternatives that the attempt to trace it, of however little utilitarian value, would offer scope for all kinds of piquant speculation. Next to the associations of poetry, it is the metaphorical association which most commonly endows a fine word with its attractiveness. Thus in the obsolete word *wanhope*, signifying *despair*, the gleam of

the underlying metaphor pierces through the plain meaning of the word and reveals the faint but still beautiful outline of a forgotten personification. Sometimes it is sound alone which conjures up a powerful associated image and fills a word with its magnetic attraction. Thus the rotund vowel-sounds of the word *emolument* irresistibly suggest a prosperous income; while the thin meagre syllables of *pittance* suggest a threadbare purse. That rare word *rondure*, recently rejuvenated by Mr. H. M. Tomlinson, suggests its meaning of a round, smooth, bosky hillock almost entirely by the suavity of its sound: "For the chalk country, with its faint lines, and its clean rondures, gives a curious sense of buoyancy and volatility."

The shade of difference between a group of synonyms is often not in meaning but in atmospheric quality. *Horse* and *steed* are equivalent in meaning, but literally worlds apart in flavour. "Bluebell is a good horse," writes one of the Oracles of racing journalism, "and ought to justify his backers at Newmarket." And Keats writes, "I set her on my pacing steed, And nothing else saw all day long." And the difference is the distance between Newmarket and the elfin grot; just as the difference between *raiment* and *clothes* is the distance between Babylon and Bond Street. Sometimes the same word may be capable of evoking two distinct and separate associations. "Dealer in antiques" suggests a flavour of mustiness and decay. But the poet—that is, the man who wants to get from words something more than their mere meaning—can fill that word with the most animated suggestion: "I met a traveller from an antique land." In that solitary word Shelley evokes a vision of all the lost splendours of Egypt. The poets, whether they versify or not, are those whose susceptibility differentiates between the flavours of words; and their discoveries and experiments establish precedents which prose should cherish and adopt.

This preoccupation with the flavour of words may at first seem a luxury which the writer of plain prose should eschew; but in reality the ability to find suggestive epithets makes for pithy prose and not for ornamental prose-poetry. A style which is distinguished by exactness in the meaning of the words used is evidently an economical one: no words have to be wasted in adjusting a meaning which is only half-elucidated by slack phraseology. A further economy is derived from words which are so strong in suggestion as to



save the use of supplementary explanatory words. Thus the word *venerable* is reinforced in its primary approximate meaning, *worthy of reverence*, by the suggestion of old age, of physical frailty and spiritual robustness. It says in a word what else would need many words; it combines the diversified notions of white hair, bowed shoulders, brittle limbs, and sanctity, and creates an image of one who is in every way worthy of respect and emulation.

Metaphorical words are by their nature likely to be rich in suggestion, for they are symbols of suggestive imagery. Their quality of concentration is manifest in such phrases as Apollyon's threat to Christian: "Here will I *spill* thy soul." And if we read of a crowd *oozing* through the turnstiles into a football match, we appreciate, without the necessity of qualification, the exact image of a slow-moving, glutinous mass of humanity.

Of the truth that meaning and quality of evocation are not inevitable associates no better illustration could be found than the substitutions made in Dr. Moffatt's new translation of the Bible. Noah's orders are: "Build a barge of cypress wood, build cabins inside the barge. . . ." *Barge* for *ark* may make the meaning plainer to the dull wits for whom the translation is presumably intended; but the entire romantic suggestion of the older word is lost in the wanton substitution of a word whose associations are of dirty water and cargoes of coal and inflated dogs' bodies. There seems no reason why, in his zeal for bringing the Bible home to democracy, the translator should not substitute "American mahogany" for "cypress wood." In the same translation the Garden becomes the Park: ("In the land of Eden, to the far East, God the Eternal then planted a park")—a word which is inexact in meaning as well as weak in suggestion. "Park" is far too small for the domain of Adam and Eve, too tidy and cultivated, a place where "the Lord God walking in the garden" is no more significant than a park-keeper.

For the benefit of the student who wishes to continue this research into word-values, one or two lines of procedure may be indicated. He may trace the degeneration, through base uses, of words which have a noble lineage but have lost their haloes: such words as *love*, *pity*, *awful*, *silly*. He may speculate on the quality which gives so many names of trees and flowers their peculiarly stimulating flavour: *cypress*,

*juniper, sycamore, marigold, eucalyptus* (a name so fair for so foul a plant), *lilac, rose, primrose, jessamine, cyclamen, laurel, yew*; or why jewels seem so aptly named: *opal, pearl, sapphire, ruby, emerald, topaz, jacinth, turquoise, diamond*; or which of the rival pronunciations of *azure* gives the deeper colour; or whence comes the potency of such words as *dingy, gambol, ruminate, plow*. The running to earth of associations and sound-values is a pastime which will combine entertainment with enlightenment.

The bulk of English words are neutral; but there are many thousands which possess this suggestive power; and the greater his acquaintance with these highly-charged and concentrated words the more effective will the writer's diction be. The use of "atmospheric" words must, of course, be temperate and discriminating, or it degenerates into an irritating mannerism. The perfectly sound proposition that many old words are powerful words is sometimes perverted into the notion that archaic words give a gleam of old enamel to a piece of prose: hence the misguided fancy for *methinks, espy, damsel, shoon, yclept*. Even Lamb's cunning touch sometimes fails, when he too long indulges in words which are merely old, and forgets for a moment that antiques are not necessarily beautiful. The poorer sort of historical novelists cling to the naïve delusion that by peppering their pages with obsolete words and phrases they can conjure up glowing pictures of the Middle Ages. A restrained use of archaic terms can suggest a lost epoch: it is a kind of impressionism, and as such is discreetly used as an economical auxiliary by such skilled hands as the late Maurice Hewlett; but it is no more than an auxiliary. The prodigal use of *gadzooks, oddsbodikins*, and *by'r Lady* can evoke nothing but a wraith of the past; and in the counterfeit presentments of Mr. Jeffery Farnol we are too constantly aware of the grease-paint on his phrases ever to succumb, as we do under the spell of Florence Converse or Mary Johnston, to the fancy that time has slipped back into the Golden Age.

V

SOUND

The prose of common use is satisfied with words which are accurate in meaning. More ambitious prose expands its

resources by making use of those associations which certain words, as we have seen, have power to convey. There is a third quality of words which the most delicate prose craftsmen are careful to evoke, and which, despite the decay of the habit of reading aloud, can still delight the senses of the discriminating reader. In appraising a poem we pay attention to the quality of what Mr. Robert Graves has called its texture: the pattern of its vowel and consonantal sounds; and the more subtle prose writer makes use of the same devices as those the poet uses to enrich the texture of his stuff.

The more elaborate manifestations of this fastidious craftsmanship do not concern the student of serviceable prose; but a close attention to the sound value of words is necessary even for the most unpretentious writer. A previous chapter indicated the damage to lucidity which cacophonous words or phrases can commit (pp. 35-6); and the elimination of these jingles is an essential part of the process of revision. The habit of reading his work aloud is again recommended to the writer who wants to be sure that none of these elusive false notes are left in his final draft.

Since rhythm is created by the sound of separate words as well as by the grouping of words, it is evident that choice of diction partly determines the cadence of a passage. There may be occasions when only one word will express the writer's meaning, and in such an eventuality considerations of rhythm must be overridden. Very often, as we saw in the last chapter, a recasting of sentence-parts will remove a defect of rhythm; but sometimes the only remedy is the substitution of a word whose sound does not impede the flow of the sentence. Thus the choice between *mean* and *parsimonious* or between *many* and *multitudinous* may be determined entirely by the demands of rhythm. The poet is evidently much concerned with the rhythmic value of words, for his business is to sift out from a group of synonyms one which, in the number and accent of its syllables, is capable of fitting exactly into a bar of his line. The prose-writer is under no such obligation to fit his words into carefully-measured spaces; but, although this circumstance may result in a common neglect of sound-values in prose, the fastidious writer realizes that the more subtle quality of prose rhythm actually makes his job of fitting words into a cadence quite as arduous as the poet's more mechanical function of fitting words into a fixed pattern.

## VI

There are certain devices common to prose and poetry which are often regarded as mere adornment, although in fact and in the best practice they emphasize and reinforce the content of a sentence. Of these the one which most concerns the prose-writer is alliteration. This device is very commonly used as a flourish, by film-caption writers and advertisement agents; but even their use of it has a real value, for it aims at concentrating the reader's attention upon their slogans by catching his eye and his ear. It is a godsend also to the cheaper journalist who employs it to give a flavour of pungency to his sentences. Thus a recent pressman described drug-traffickers as "those slinking shapes who haunt the malarial marshes of society." Alliteration is obviously a trick which may be easily overdone; and the constant practice of it irritates the susceptible reader who is beyond being captured by mountebank ruses.

But a moderate and intelligent use of alliteration most certainly pleases the ear, and at the same time clinches the content of a passage. The following few examples may show how effective the device can be. In this sentence the alliteration is simply decorative: "The moon shed its mellow rays upon the remains of the medieval castle." But in the next sentence, a comparison between the Irish and the Albanians, the alliteration gives point and emphasis to the idea: "Both are sunk in bigotry and broils; they resemble one another in their love of dirt, disorder, and display." Lamb was very expert in combining the decorative and the utilitarian functions of alliteration—in such phrases as "defunct dragons" and "choleric complexions" and "the cliffs of rocky Ithaca." Ruskin, too, was fond of the device, and at his best could control it perfectly, never making it too blatant and obtrusive—as in such phrases as "the slow settling of the slime of those turbid rivers" and "every pinnacle and turret glanced or glowed, overlaid with gold, or bossed with jasper." Macaulay uses it with admirable effect, to stiffen the line of his sentences: "Persecution produced its natural effect on them: it found them a sect; it made them a faction." This phrase about a miser is excellently edged with alliteration: "richer than Cræsus, but inflamed with a peevish penuriousness"; and the onomatopoeic effect is very apparent in—"The swish of the

scythes in the grass": a phrase where even the regular beat is perfectly appropriate, even in prose, inasmuch as it suggests the regular rhythm of the reaper's action. If a prose-writer permits himself to become obsessed with the devisal of cunning sound effects, the result is fatal to what should be his first concern; for the prime function of prose, we may recall, is to get itself immediately and continuously understood, and the employment of devices must be subordinate to this first purpose. The poet has a special licence to be merely decorative when he can be nothing more, and in the finest poetry the graces of decoration are additions made after the "drive" or "poetic impulse" has wrought the first white-hot draft. This passage from Blackmore illustrates how a writer's meaning may become clotted when he so far forgets his function as to abandon himself to the pursuit of alliterative effects and harmonies of assonance and vowel-play:

"For even in the world of wheat, when deep among the varnished crispness of the jointed stalks, and below the feathered yielding of the graceful heads, even as I gripped the swathes and swept the sickle round them, even as I flung them by to rest on brother stubble, through the whirling yellow world, and eagerness of reaping, came the vision of my love as with downcast eyes she wondered at my power of passion."

Onomatopoeic effects, generally considered to be the particular property of the poet, may be equally well contrived in prose: always with the qualification that they must be more than decorative, that they must contribute to the elucidation of the writer's meaning. This sentence from Butcher and Lang's *Odyssey* is a deliberate arrangement of sounds to reinforce the sense of the words: "But oft as he went about to hurl it over the top, the weight would drive him back, so once again to the plain rolled the stone. . . ." By a well-judged repetition of a single vowel-sound the next sentence conveys a very effective impression of the flashing beam from a light-house " . . . we saw, among the islands, the pricking of a quick pointed light." Mr. Aldous Huxley, by the same trick of assonance, secures this excellent onomatopoeia: "second-rate contraltos *fruitily hoofing Schubert and Brahms.*" Ambrose Bierce achieves an equally powerful effect with this: "Away to the rear, in the sleeping camp, were a *singing* of bugles and a *grumble* of drums." (The

sentence happens to conform to the pattern of a couple of four-barred lines of verse ; and it is more than likely that such a master of prose as Bierce knew what he had done. Whether consciously verse or not, this patterned sentence is, in its association of military precision, perfectly congruous.

Without resort to the device of selecting purely onomatopoeic words the careful prose-writer habitually adapts his diction to the nature of his subject-matter : by employing short, light, rapid, staccato words for quick-moving narrative, by using long, slow, solid words for weighty didactic writing, and so on.

VII

From many centuries of practice and precept there have emerged certain principles of prose diction which have been codified by the ablest authorities<sup>1</sup> in such terms as these :

I. *Choose the Saxon word in preference to the Latin ;*

And, as the natural corollaries to this first principle :

II. *The short word in preference to the long ;*

III. *The familiar word rather than the obscure ;*

IV. *A single word rather than a circumlocution ;*

V. *And the concrete term rather than the abstract.*

Any simple code of conduct is necessarily a generalization ; and this canon of literary diction must be greatly modified before it can become a reliable guide.

Some people seem to think that the use of Saxon words is somehow more English, more patriotic, than the use of Latin terms ; and they adopt the Saxon diction in much the same spirit as they smoke Empire tobacco : not because it is pleasant but because it is home-grown. A narrow and cranky notion. Saxon is only one element, although the first one, in a language which by ransacking the vocabularies of the world has become one of the richest and most expressive of tongues ; and to be content to fish for words in a single tributary of the main stream is to make a poor catch. That sentimental nationalism which so yearns to identify itself with the speech of Gurth the Swine-herd is in fact attempting the impossible ; for no adequate conversation and no adequate prose can avoid the use of an extensive proportion of words

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fowler's *The King's English* (Oxford University Press), and Q.'s *On the Art of Writing* (Cambridge University Press)

of Romance origin. There are hundreds of words of Latin origin, necessary in daily use, which have no Saxon equivalents, and which were coined for that very reason. *Prescience*, for example, has no such synonym. Its meaning is not *foresight*; and *foreknowledge* is obviously too clumsy a substitute. The world of mental and material experience which a Saxon inhabited was a fraction only in extent of the world of to-day; and his limited vocabulary is inadequate to express the wide range of objectivity and idea which has developed since his remote day.

An antiquarian preference for Saxon terms is more intelligible but no less deplorable than the nationalist preference; for the love of things which have nothing to commend them but their antiquity is one of the most offensive kinds of affectation. The cult of an obsolete vocabulary is a stupid mannerism; but as a recreation, the selection of an all-Saxon diction is likely to prove an amusing pastime; and with the help of a dictionary (or *word-book*) and a little ingenuity, some very diverting words and phrases may be discovered or invented: such as *child-wain* for *perambulator*, and *twinkle-craft* (a forgery, alas) for *astronomy*. The following delightful model of how the game should be played is Mr. J. C. Squire's.<sup>1</sup> It is the obituary notice of a fictitious captain of industry:

#### "THE HISTORY OF EARL PUMBLES

The late Earl (Eorl ?) Pumbles was of lowly birth. He was born in the thorp of Stoke Parva in 1850, the son of a penniless timber-wright. Outdriven from his first school, he became a fighting-man. He was a dreadless and fearnought wight, and was once left for dead on the field, bleeding at every sweat-hole. The saw-bones brought him through. Coming back to England he saw the haplihood of making a gold-hoard in the soap-trade. He set up a business with the gold of others; got rid of his yoke-mates by sundry underslinkings, and soon became amazingly wealthy. An earldom followed; though it is markworthy, that on the morning after its bestowal a great songsmith wrote to the *Daily Score* to say: 'The Gusher of Fair-Name is befouled.' In 1910 Lord Pumbles went as sendling to the King of Siam, with a bodeword from our King. In the back-end of the next year his health gave out; he became bit-wise worse; and he died last night of belly-ache. Lord Pumbles

<sup>1</sup> From *Books in General*, p. 246.

was often to be seen at Sir Henry Wood's Out-Road Glee-Motes at Queen's Hall, but he was almost a comeling at the House of Lords. He was cunning in Kin-lore, and in his fair wonestead at Pumbles wrote a great book on the stem-tree of his kin. By ill hap he was an cat-all and rather soaksome. He will be buried on Wednesday in the bone-yard at Pumbles, in which lich-rest his wife already lies. The earldom goes, by out-of-the-way odd-come-short, to his daughter."

The first of the five principles of diction is not, therefore to be interpreted in its strictest sense. The many words of Romance origin for which there are no effective substitutes must be freely used ; and even when the Romance word has a Saxon equivalent, considerations of rhythm or of congruity may decide in favour of the Romance word. There is a time to indulge in a pyrotechnic display, and there is a time to let off fireworks. The rule means that, other things being equal, the balance of *preference* should be on the side of the Saxon word. And this is a very reasonable proposition ; for the real value of the first of these five precepts lies in its implicit warning against the use of a cumbersome polysyllabic highly-Latinized vocabulary. In order to emphasize the dangers of periphrastic diction the First Rule is compelled slightly to exaggerate the advantages of Saxon words. A comparison between these two extracts will demonstrate the general truth of this rule. The first is by Dr. Johnson ; the second by that modern master of prose, Mr. H. M. Tomlinson. The merits of Johnson's writing are perfectly obvious : a mastery of sentence-structure and a notable sonority of rhythm ; but he lacks agility of phrase, and his diction is so grandiloquent and elaborate as to distract the reader in a very short time. As Hazlitt said : " He uses none but ' tall opaque words,' taken from ' the first row of the rubric,'— words with the greatest number of syllables, or Latin phrases with merely English terminations." To this clotted diction the clean concrete Saxon terms of Mr. Tomlinson's are a very powerful contrast.

(i) " Few minds will be long confined to severe and laborious meditation ; and when a successful attack on knowledge has been made, the student recreates himself with the contemplation of his conquest, and forbears another incursion till the new-acquired truth has become familiar, and his curiosity calls upon him for fresh gratifications ; whether the time of



intermission is spent in company or in solitude, in necessary business or in voluntary levities, the understanding is equally abstracted from the object of inquiry; but, perhaps, if it be detained by occupations less pleasing, it returns again to study with greater alacrity than when it is gluttled with ideal pleasures, and surfeited with intemperance of application. He that will not suffer himself to be discouraged by fancied impossibilities, may sometimes find his abilities invigorated by the necessity of exerting them in short intervals, as the force of a current is increased by the contraction of its channel."

(ii) From *Old Junk* describing the sky of North Africa:

"It is not a hard blue roof; your sight is lost in the atmosphere which is azure. The sun more than shines; his beams ring on the rocks, and glance in colours from the hills. From a distance the flowers on a hill slope will pour down to the sea in such a torrent of hues that you might think the arch of the rainbow you saw there had collapsed in the sun and was now rills and cascades. The grove of palms holding their plumes above a white village might be delicate pencillings on the yellow sheet of desert. The heat is a balm. The shadows are stains of indigo on the roads and pale walls."

This passage may be further considered for these points: it shows what can be done with monosyllables; it illustrates the rare accurate use of the word *pale*; and it displays the justifiable use of a chromatic adjective. Those who persistently write of the *green grass* and the *blue sky* and the *silver stars* should ponder the difference between their effects and the effect here of the one word *yellow desert*.

A comparison between two pieces of prose which are alike in substance may prove even more illuminating. Both the following extracts are attempts at landscape painting. The first is elaborate, and full of Latinized terms; the second is written mostly in the simplest Saxon:

(i) "Its last filmy wreaths of sulphurous smoke had centuries before ceased to wreath themselves from Ajubajao's enormous womb. Leagues distant though its cone must be, its jagged outlines were sharply discernible, cut clean against that southern horizon. The skies shallowly arching the plain of lava that flowed out annularly from its base in enormous undulations, league on league, until its margin lay etched and fretted against

the eastern heavens—this low-hung firmament was now of a greenish pallor. In its midst the noonday's sun burned raylessly like a sullen topaz set in jade.

But utterly lifeless though the plain appeared to be, minute susurrations were occasionally audible, caused apparently by scatterings of lava dust lifted from their hollows on heated draughts of air. These gathering in volume, raised at last their multitudinous voices into a prolonged hiss, a sustained shrill sibilation as if the silken fringes of an enormous robe were being dragged gently across this ink-black Sahara.

As they subsided once more, drifting softly to rest, a faint musical murmur followed their gigantic sigh, like that of far-distant drums and dulcimers from a secret and hidden borderland. Then this also ceased, and only the plaintive horns of the midges and the scurry of beetles scuttling beneath their shards to and fro in their haunts in the crevices of the lava broke the hush."

(ii) " I thought that it was a Sunday morning in May ; that it was Easter Sunday, and as yet very early in the morning. I was standing, as it seemed to me, at the door of my own cottage. Right before me lay the very scene which could really be commanded from that situation, but exalted, as was usual, and solemnised by the power of dreams. There were the same mountains, and the same lovely valley at their feet ; but the mountains were raised to more than Alpine height, and there was interspace far larger between them of savannahs and forest lawns ; the hedges were rich with white roses ; and no living creature was to be seen. . . . "

This passage from *Rural Rides*, one of the finest of all Cobbett's exuberant and vigorous essays in prose, further illustrates the virility and lucidity which are the natural consequences of a style free from elaborate diction :

" We went a little out of the way to go to a place called the Bourn, which lies in the heath at about a mile from Farnham. It is a winding narrow valley, down which, during the wet season of the year, there runs a stream beginning at the Holt Forest, and emptying itself into the Wey just below Moor-Park, which was the seat of Sir William Temple when Swift was residing with him. We went to this Bourn in order that I might show my son the spot where I received the rudiments of my education. There is a little hop-garden in which I used to work when from eight to ten years old ; from which I have scores of times run to follow the hounds, leaving the hoe to do the best that it could to destroy the weeds ; but the most interesting

thing was a *sand-hill*, which goes from a part of the heath down to the rivulet. As a due mixture of pleasure with toil, I, with two brothers, used occasionally to *disport* ourselves, as the lawyers call it, at this sand-hill. Our diversion was this: we used to go to the top of the hill, which was steeper than the roof of a house; one used to draw his arms out of the sleeves of his smock-frock, and lay himself down with his arms by his sides; and then the others, one at head, and the other at feet, sent him rolling down the hill like a barrel or a log of wood. By the time he got to the bottom, his hair, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, were all full of this loose sand; then the others took their turn, and at every roll, there was a monstrous spell of laughter. I had often told my sons of this while they were very little, and I now took one of them to see the spot. But, that was not all. This was the spot where I was receiving my *education*; and this was the sort of education; and I am perfectly satisfied that if I had not received such an education, or something very much like it; that, if I had been brought up a milksop, with a nursery-maid everlastingly at my heels, I should have been at this day as great a fool, as inefficient a mortal, as any of those frivolous idiots that are turned out from Winchester and Westminster School, or from any of those dens of dunces called Colleges and Universities. It is impossible to say how much I owe to that sandhill; and I went to return it my thanks for the ability which it probably gave me to be one of the greatest terrors to one of the greatest and most powerful bodies of knaves and fools that ever were permitted to afflict this or any other country."

Generally the choice of Saxon words in preference to Romance words means the choice of short words rather than long ones; generally, but not invariably. It is by no means to be assumed, as if to the discredit of Romance diction, that the short words are always the Saxon words. In the following random list of short words there is no single word of Saxon derivation, although most people would hazard the opposite opinion. Appearances are as deceptive in philology as anywhere else: *Amend, villa, carrot, case, vent, trench, serf, toast, leash, beast, vex, bowl, trunk, torch, scout, tint, joy, gum, frown, grease.*

Herbert Spencer justified his preference for short Saxon terms by a sound bit of logic:

"The superiority possessed by Saxon English is its comparative brevity. If it be an advantage to express an idea in

the smallest number of words, then will it be an advantage to express it in the smallest number of syllables. If circuitous phrases and needless expletives distract the attention and diminish the strength of the impression produced, then do surplus articulations also. A certain effort must be required to recognize every vowel and consonant; some attention is absorbed by each syllable. Hence, the shortness of Saxon words becomes a reason for their greater force."

The range of expression which a simple Saxon diction permits is not broad enough for all uses, but it is far broader than most people imagine; and the further its possibilities are explored the more scope will it reveal. Macaulay has directed attention to the singular variety and expressiveness of Bunyan's democratic diction:

"His vocabulary is the vocabulary of the common people. There is not an expression, if we except a few terms of theology, which would puzzle the rudest peasant. We have observed several pages which do not contain a single word of more than two syllables. Yet, no writer has said more exactly what he wanted to say. For magnificence, for pathos, for vehement exhortation, for subtle disquisition, for every purpose of the poet, the orator, and the divine, this homely dialect, this dialect of plain working men, was sufficient."

A long procession of polysyllabic words, such as we meet so often in Gibbon or Johnson, soon becomes wearisome: sentence after sentence of this heavy armour-plated kind: "He beheld with temperate firmness the approach of death; enfranchized his slaves, minutely directed the order of his funeral, and moderated the lamentations of his weeping friends, on whom he bestowed the benediction of peace." But it is foolish to suppose that it is by any means universally true that the short word is *always* preferable to the long. The necessities of rhythm or congruity may again dominate the choice, and may require the selection of lengthy and sonorous words. "The way of the sinner is hard" is not, for example, so rhythmically effective as "The way of the transgressor is hard," and there is a better balance in "The Red Sea is thus denominated . . ." than in "The Red Sea is thus called. . . ." A passage in which long words predominate may achieve a sonority of cadence and a dignity of tone which most perfectly match the occasion and the subject-matter. Here is such

a passage, the last page of Johnson's Preface to the first edition of his Dictionary :

"Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot ultimately be defeated : tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration : we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.

In hope of giving longevity to that which its own nature forbids to be immortal, I have devoted this book, the labour of years, to the honour of my country, that we may no longer yield the palm of philology to the nations of the continent. The chief glory of every people arises from its authors ; whether I shall add anything by my own writings to the reputation of English literature, must be left to time : much of my life has been lost under the pressure of disease ; much has been trifled away ; and much has always been spent in provision for the day that was passing over me ; but I shall not think my employment useless or ignoble, if by my assistance foreign nations, and distant ages, gain access to the propagators of knowledge, and understand the teachers of truth ; if my labours afford light to the repositories of science, and add celebrity to Bacon, to Hooker, to Milton, and to Boyle.

When I am animated by this wish, I look with pleasure on my book, however defective, and deliver it to the world with the spirit of a man that has endeavoured well. That it will immediately become popular I have not promised to myself : a few wild blunders and risible absurdities, from which no work of such multiplicity was ever free, may for a time furnish folly with laughter, and harden ignorance in contempt ; but useful diligence will at last prevail, and there never can be wanting some, who distinguish desert, who will consider that no dictionary of a living tongue can ever be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some falling away ; that a whole life cannot be spent upon syntax and etymology, and that even a whole life would not be sufficient ; that he whose design includes whatever language can express must often speak of what he does not understand ; that a writer will sometimes be hurried by eagerness to the end, and sometimes faint with weariness under a task which Scaliger compares to the labours of the anvil and the mine ; that what is obvious is not always known, and what is known is not always present ; that sudden fits of inadvertency will surprise vigilance, slight avocations will seduce attention, and casual eclipses of the mind will darken learning ; and that the writer shall often in vain trace his memory at the moment of need for that which yesterday he knew with intuitive readiness, and which will come uncalled into his thoughts to-morrow.

In this work, when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed ; and though no book was ever spared out of tenderness to the author, and the world is little solicitous to know whence proceeded the faults of that which it condemns, yet it may gratify curiosity to inform it that the *English Dictionary* was written with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great ; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academic bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow ; and it may repress the triumph of malignant criticism to observe, that if our language is not here fully displayed, I have only failed in an attempt which no human powers have hitherto completed. If the lexicons of ancient tongues, now immutably fixed and comprised in a few volumes, be yet, after the toil of successive ages, inadequate and delusive ; if the aggregated knowledge and co-operating diligence of the Italian academicians did not secure them from the censure of Beni ; if the embodied critics of France, when fifty years had been spent upon their work, were obliged to change its economy, and give their second editions another form, I may surely be contented without the praise of perfection which, if I could obtain, in this gloom of solitude what would it avail me ?

I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds ; I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquillity, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise."

The second maxim must, therefore, be accepted with this very important reservation : that there are occasions for that solemnity of utterance which can be effectively achieved only by the use of words from " the first row of the rubric." An Elizabethan critic, Richard Carew, has well expressed the necessity for a judicious mixture of long Latin words and short Saxon ones : " The long words that we borrow, being intermingled with the short of our own store, make up a perfect harmony, by culling from out which mixture (with judgment) you may frame your speech according to the matter you must work on, majestic, pleasant, delicate, or manly, more or less, in what sort you please."

In passing we may pause to start a hare which some reader may care to pursue : it is a national characteristic of the English to be amused by a long word. The French, of all classes, use them in everyday speech, and find in them no subtle source of humour ; but the Englishman regards such

a phrase as "a terminological inexactitude" as something inherently funny; and Dickens exploited this national idiosyncrasy to its full. Is it our scorn for the pretentious? or our mirthful reaction to what we don't understand? or a manifestation of the peculiarly English sense of humour? The Scotch like big words: witness that Glasgow workman who interrupted a speaker at an open-air meeting with the ejaculation: "I characterize that last statement as a bluidy lee!"

The Third Rule stresses the necessity of refraining from any parade of obscure or unfamiliar terms. Johnson's definition of a net is made formidable by the strangeness as well as by the length of its words: "Anything reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections." And Chambers' *Encyclopædia* defines the modern English language ("living English") as "an isolating language with incipient agglutination." To pepper a piece of prose with "taffeta phrases, silken terms precise" may be to display the extent of one's acquaintance with the unfamiliar, but the ostentatious parade of these acquisitions is a serious lapse of taste. This particular mannerism has been affected by some of the major writers of English prose; but it may be disputed whether even Lamb can gracefully wear the strange foreign fashions which he sometimes flaunts. Among his freaks, inherited from Browne and Fuller, are to be found: *agnize* (admit), *additaments* (additions), *engendure* (birth), *arride* (to please), and *indivertible*. Ben Jonson gave some very sound advice on this tendency: "Nor fetch words from the extreme and utmost ages; since the chief virtue of a style is perspicuity, and nothing so vicious in it, as to need an interpreter. Words borrowed of antiquity do lend a kind of majesty to style, and are not without their delight sometimes. . . . Some words are to be culled out for ornament and colour, as we gather flowers to straw houses, or make garlands; but they are better when they grow to our style." Swift records a charming practice in which Lord Falkland used to indulge, so as to keep his writing free from this blemish: "When he doubted whether a word was perfectly intelligible or not, he used to consult one of his lady's chambermaids (not the waiting-woman, because it was possible she might be conversant in romances) and by her judgment was guided whether to receive or reject it."

The Fourth Rule is directed against the very prevalent habit of evading a direct and simple statement. This is a kind of literary prudery: an aversion from any naked form of expression; and the tedious circumlocutors take infinite pains to swaddle up every bare statement in a bundle of woolly phrases. Instead of answering a question with: "No, sir!" the Cabinet minister asseverates that "The answer is in the negative." A publisher in commending his wares allows himself to write: "A semi-flexible form of binding has been adopted, as a safeguard against the damage *inevitably associated with* hasty packing." Why this coy evasion? Why *associated with* when he means *caused by*? "Copiousness of words," said Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, "is always false eloquence"; and in writing, no less than in oratory, the fraud of circumlocution is easy to expose. As Peer Gynt peeled away the skins from the onion to find, at last, nothing at all, so we peel away the phrases of a circumlocution—and, again, find nothing at all. What promises to be a clear concrete sentence fades into a cloud of circumlocution in this fragment from a story of Mr. de la Mare's: "Autumnal scents, failing day, rain so gentle and persistent—such phenomena as these have a slightly soporific effect on the human consciousness."

Although the circumlocution commonly consists of a sentence for a word, it may appear as a single word; the evasive word preferred to the direct. Professor Weekley quotes from *Peter Simple* an example of the gentility of the coloured belles of Barbados: "Fate had placed me opposite to a fine turkey. I asked my partner if I should have the pleasure of helping her to a piece of the breast. She looked at me indignantly, and said, 'Curse your impudence, sar; I wonder where you larn manners. Sar, I take a lilly turkey *bosom*, if you please.'" It is a similarly exasperating prudery which prefers "stomach" to the onomatopoetic rotundity of "belly."

When an employer finds, in writing a testimonial for his departing office-boy, that he has really little to say about the fellow, he resorts to circumlocution, and tries to make things sound better than they are: "He has discharged his duties with unremitting assiduity." When he really has a lot of good things to say the ring of truth comes out in the simplicity of such phrases as "He has always done his work well."



Among much other mischievous advice which he gave to his long-suffering son, Lord Chesterfield (as pretentious a Pecksniff in the art of literature as in the art of life) offered this precept: "One should say, in condoling with a friend, not 'I am sorry for your loss,' but, 'I hope, sir, you will do me the justice to be persuaded that I am not insensible of your unhappiness, that I take part in your distress, and shall ever be affected when you are so.'" When the fullest allowance has been made for the conventional flourishes of speech which in The Age of Good Manners were as elegant as their clothes and their salutations, it is impossible to justify Chesterfield's preference. It stinks of hypocrisy and pretentiousness. The evasive terms which he recommends may be fruitfully contrasted with the pungent simplicity of Johnson's memorable answer to his lordship's false compliments.

Unlike most dealers in periphrasis, Micawber knew what he really wanted to say, and was capable of translating his effusions into plain speech: "I am under the impression," said Mr. Micawber, "that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of this modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road,—in short," said Mr. Micawber, . . . "that you might lose yourself."

Much nineteenth-century fiction irritates a susceptible reader by the insistent periphrases of its dialogue. No matter what their age or standard of life, characters are made to speak in a constant and stereotyped elegance of phrase. Lytton, Harrison Ainsworth, and Ballantyne are notorious offenders. Ballantyne makes a thirteen-year-old castaway exclaim: "I find the club rather an unwieldy instrument for my delicately-formed muscles, and I flatter myself I shall do more execution with the spear." The translators of Jules Verne affect a similar incongruous jargon for the description of the breeziest adventures.

One of the most inappropriate bits of circumlocution was the revised proposal for an inscription on Canning's tomb. The original suggestion was to put: "He died poor." But this was tricked out into: "He expired in extreme indigence." The perfect aptness of the first lies in its stark diction: a congruity of sense and sound which is entirely missing in the opulent revised version.

The Rule which recommends the preference of concrete expressions over abstract ones is designed to encourage graphic and pictorial writing, writing which brings to the mind images and not shadows. Of these two sentences the first is written in abstract terms; the second in concrete. The first is perfectly clear in meaning, but it is entirely colourless. The second version transforms the abstractions into pictures and thus has a force of imaginative appeal which actually makes it a fuller expression of the idea so insipidly phrased in the first sentence :

- i. "When the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of their penal code will be severe."
- ii. "When men delight in battles, bull-fights, and combats of gladiators, they will punish by hanging, burning, and the rack."

Abstract expressions, as we find from most of Johnson's prose, may be sonorous and imposing, but only concrete expressions can endow prose with colour and vigour. Even when a concrete expression seems to clamour to be used, a left-handed writer will involve himself in the clumsiest abstraction. Thus a geographer, writing of the silt accumulations in the Nile delta, says: "The annual flow of the Nile helped to remove this *difficulty*." How could he avoid the obvious word *deposit*?

Stevenson was very much aware of the capacity of a concrete phrase to transfigure abstract ideas into brilliant images of reality; and his habit illustrates the truth that concrete writing naturally tends to become metaphor. For "dazed and stupefied with exhaustion" he writes "with a frost on his five wits"; for "in indolent mood" he writes "lying with a handkerchief over their ears and a glass at their elbow"; for the abstraction "old age" he substitutes "the time a man has to use spectacles and cannot walk without a stick." For such a sentence as "In old age one may occasionally recapture the lost enthusiasms and pleasures of boyhood" he writes "Grandfather William can retire upon occasion into the green enchanted forest of his boyhood." Concrete writing substitutes an individual example for the generalization offered by the abstract; the abstrac-

tion, "One may study philosophy by oneself, but a joke must be communally enjoyed," Stevenson turns into: "You could read Kant by yourself, if you wanted, but you must share a joke with some one else." His concrete vision illuminates one generalization after another with vivid metaphor: "A ship captain is a good man to marry, if it is a marriage of love, for absences are a good influence in love, and *keep it bright and delicate*; but he is just the worst man if the feeling is more pedestrian, as habit is too frequently *torn open and the solder has never time to set*."

He uses a generalization as a spring-board from which he leaps immediately into vivid particulars: "It is surely beyond a doubt that people should be a good deal idle in youth. For though here and there a Lord Macaulay may escape from school honours with all his wits about him, most boys pay so dear for their medals that they never afterwards have a shot in their locker, and begin the world bankrupt." And to say of a man that he has never known "the twilight of dubiety" is more forcible than to say "he has never experienced a mood of uncertainty."

Mr. D. H. Lawrence, describing the conversation of a bore who insisted on babbling platitudes, concretizes the idea in the phrase—"this miserable creature stuffing wads of chewed newspaper into my ear." Mr. G. K. Chesterton's prose is illuminated by a similar talent for lighting upon the concrete expression: "She had the knack of saying everything with her face: her silence was a sort of steady applause."

It may be well at this point to recall what was said earlier in this chapter about that conventionalized form of metaphor which is called *metonymy*. When the concrete phrase becomes petrified by the daily drippings of shoddy writers, it degenerates into this blight called metonymy: hence such devitalized phrases as *the pen*, *the sceptre*.

## VIII

## JARGON

All five of these precepts are restatements of the one radical principle of prose composition; each stresses one particular aspect of it; and all are approximately summarized in the first of the five. When Saxon words predominate in a piece of prose, the expressions are most likely to be short, familiar,

direct, and concrete. When Latinisms predominate, there is the most likelihood of long and unfamiliar words, and a greater tendency to abstractions and periphrases.

The five faults which the code aims at eliminating are the five symptoms of that literary malady called JARGON. Those most liable to the disease are the writers who are harassed by the delusion that it is necessary to keep up appearances, to affect a kind of literary gentility. The result of such an attitude, in letters as in life, is a transparent showiness and a striving after effect which deceives none but the deluded poseurs themselves. Jargon is a manifestation of the impulse to talk big, to create an imposing impression, and is therefore a kind of vulgarity. The jargoneer's habitual horror of direct expression constrains him to adopt certain evasive phrases. A writer on church-architecture tells us that "the nave embraces the middle of the church." Amorous knave! Jargon very often lands its victims in such ridiculous booby-traps as this. A historian writing of the old Egyptian calendar involves himself in a similar confusion: "A year embraced the time between the sowing and the reaping." And it is characteristic of the jargoneer that he will never *take* an opportunity, but insists on *embracing* it. Another mark of jargon is a mock-genteel refusal to use the first person singular. He resorts to all manner of shifts to avoid the perfectly legitimate use of "I." Sometimes he twists the sentence into the clumsy passive form: "Here was seen a gaudy poppy," for "here I saw. . . ."

The word *case* is another familiar funk-hole for the artless dodgers of plain terms: "in the case of . . . " "in that case . . . " "in any case. . . ." A musical critic clumsily tumbles into it in this sentence: "In the programme was the A minor violin concerto, with Jelly D'Aranyi as a brilliant soloist, Miss Fanny Davies performing the like office *in the case of* the Fifth Concerto." *The like office* would have been offence enough for one sentence. In *On the Art of Writing Q.* provides pleasant entertainment with his exposures of the misuse of this word. To his list of amusing specimens we may add an example which shows how, by a freak of coincidence, the case-monger may for once blunder into literal accuracy. The sentence describes the work of some archaeologists who, by examining the gut-contents of Egyptian mummies, seek to prove that corn once grew in Egypt:

"They examined the selected mummies carefully, and found in every case the substance of the last meal before death." Q. issues a warning against many other old offenders of the same breed: "Whenever in your reading you come across one of these words, *case, instance, character, nature, condition, persuasion, degree*—whenever in writing your pen betrays you to one or another of them—pull yourself up and take thought." And again: "Train your suspicions to bristle up whenever you come upon '*as regards*,' '*with regard to*,' '*in respect of*,' '*in connection with*,' '*according as to whether*.'" The inherent clumsiness of such phrases is apparent in this sentence from a letter written by the Duke of Argyll to Johnson: "I am glad to hear your journey from this place was not unpleasant, in regard to your horse." The worst offenders are, of course, business men, who, as a class, are constitutionally incapable of writing a letter in clean, terse terms, and who couldn't write at all if they were deprived of the phrases included on Q.'s black list.

One of the most misused of these words is *character*. The word, accurately used, can relate only to persons. Yet it is frequently employed—probably because it sounds rather imposing—where the simpler and more exact word *kind* is required. A Sports Column writer (a notorious breed of Jargoneers) announces that: "A billiard tournament of an unusual character will be held. . . ." The information which the Turf specialists provide in these same columns is manifestly thin and unreliable and non-committal; and this circumstance accounts for the very diverting jargon of racing gossip. In the Turf notes of the current issue of almost any newspaper the reader will find the most convincing instances of the principle that if a writer has nothing to say he tries to cover his nakedness with a web of words.

The jargoneer's habit of flinching from direct statement is evident again in this insipid phrase: "He was a physician of no mean repute": a timid and evasive expression. *Peruse* is another word whose pretentious sound endears it to the dealer in jargon. The word has a legitimate use: it means to read with close attention; but the careless writer uses it on all occasions when *read* should be used. So a reviewer writes: "We have perused Mrs. X.'s latest volume of detective stories with considerable entertainment; and we can warmly recommend them to those who are looking for light reading."

*Peruse* there is evidently wrong, for the last thing one does with light fiction is to read it studiously, with close attention. Another of the jargoneer's pet phrases is "I venture to think . . ." a phrase redolent of that mock humility with which intellectually arrogant people preface their dogmatic assertions. The only satisfaction we get from the phrase is the ironical implication that for the user of the offensive words thought is an unusual adventure. Those pompous letters to the more solid newspapers, in which adamant die-hards *venture to think*, are commonly adorned with another piece of jargon: *I opine*. Another typical blemish of this variety is *to a degree*—"Prince Rupert was impetuous to a degree." The phrase means absolutely nothing, because it immediately prompts the irritated question "What degree? What do you mean?" It so completely illustrates the jargoneer's loose habit of saying nothing at all when he imagines he is being most elegant and precise.

Jargon is everywhere rife in second-rate writing. The policeman laboriously records: "I was *proceeding* along Broad Street when my attention was directed to the prisoner." It may be argued that the policeman is accurate without knowing it; for the dignity of his customary gait is more aptly conveyed by *proceeding* than by *walking*. The windy biographer refuses to admit that his victim was born, and insists that "he first saw the light of day . . ."; and goes on to tell us how much his subject owed to "the diligent care of his maternal parent"; that he "pursued his studies at Cambridge . . ."; and so on. There is a medical jargon which speaks of "considerable abrasions and contusions": a description which is perfectly appropriate in a medical certificate—but nowhere else. The jargon of all the sciences produces some monstrous expressions which the reader may dig out of any book on chemistry or psychology. But technical jargon is not so offensive as the habitual circumlocution which is simply the product of pomposity. The lesser kind of journalism finds the circumlocution irresistible. Hasty writers seek refuge in abstract and periphrastic phrases because these conveniently cover up the traces of their loose thought. The pretentious phrases hide the emptiness of their subject-matter; whereas plain direct prose emerges only from close attention to the matter under observation. Above all, the gilded phrase imposes upon the ignorant, as

flashy piano-playing brings down the house at a music hall. It sounds good; it looks good; and its tinsel showiness deludes the simple reader as well as the flashy writer into mistaking it for good writing. Its habitual adiposity of construction and its bloated pomposity of phrase make it a fit mode of expression for jacks-in-office: hence its prevalence in all manner of official communications. Thus a City Editor writes: "It is confidently anticipated in City circles that Mr. A. will be associated with the new company in an advisory capacity on matters relating to finance." This blowsy version he finds preferable to the clean precision and simplicity of: "In the City it is expected that Mr. A. will become financial adviser to the new company." During a recent smallpox epidemic a local journalist reported: "Medical opinion asseverates that the precautionary measures which have been adopted are likely to result in considerable diminution of the ravages of the smallpox plague." And this no doubt he preferred to: "The doctors say that the precautions which have been taken should considerably reduce the ravages of the smallpox."

The same type of journalism combines the circumlocution with the heavy-footed passive in such a sentence as: "Considerable apprehensions are entertained in the locality relative to the safety of the missing climbers," for "The people of the town fear that the climbers are lost." As Mr. Arnold Bennett points out in *The Card*, the local reporter will not be content to say the burglar broke in: it must be, "the burglar effected an entrance." He will not write "the Chairman, Mr. X.," but titivates his record with "Mr. X., upon whom devolved the inaugural part of the evening's proceedings. . . ." He can never write of a woman, but invariably calls her "one of the fair sex."

Jargon has many origins. It may proceed from the delusion that elaborate terms indicate a cultured and polished writer, and that a plain mode of prose indicates poverty of mind; it may, in brief, be a manifestation of pretentiousness. It may proceed, as much clerical and parliamentary jargon does, from the habit of evasion; priest and politician have much to conceal, and they do it under a camouflage of sonorous phrases. And again, when it appears in the composition of eighteen-year-old youths, it is no more than a temporary and harmless manifestation of that adolescent preening of

feathers which finds its complementary expression in gaudy socks and polychromatic ties.

Some element of justification for circumlocution there undoubtedly is. For example, the rhythm of the passage may be improved by a periphrasis; and if the reader reconsiders some of the examples quoted in Chapter V he will find that many of these owe their sonority and cadence to their choice of long words and elegant periphrases. What they lose in directness and simplicity they gain in sound. But periphrasis is certainly not synonymous with flowing rhythms; and in the absence of this sole justification, circumlocution is simply verbiage.

Congruity may sometimes justify elaboration of diction. There are occasions when ceremonial phraseology is more apt than direct terms; but these occur in that more momentous kind of prose which we have found is more rightly called rhetoric, in prose whose subject-matter is so exalted and majestic as to demand by natural right the prerogative of purple vesture. The dignity of the subject-matter may, then, sufficiently justify some opulence of language; but this patrician prose has no kinship with a trivial subject-matter masquerading and making itself ridiculous in attire to which it has no right and which it doesn't know how to wear. There are, too, a few individual writers to whom we accord this privilege; writers of a peculiar dignity and solemnity who can, whatever the occasion, wear the habiliments of circumlocution with natural ease and grace. Dr. Johnson, and the late Earl of Oxford and Asquith, for instance, grave and reverend signiors of letters, write with an elaboration and sonority which is not a designed and rehearsed effect, but a mode of expression which is inevitable from men of their mental calibre and specific gravity. A less massive mode of utterance from them would be incongruous. It may also be noted that sustained and spacious sentence-forms like Johnson's require a complementary massiveness in their diction. Johnson was a stickler for ceremony in writing. In his note-book he would permit himself the *déshabille* of such a phrase as: "When we were taken upstairs, a dirty fellow bounced out of the bed on which one of us was to lie." But when he writes the notes up into his published journal, that entry appears in its periwig: "Out of one of the couches on which we were to repose, started up at entrance a man



black as a Cyclops from the forge." The second is more elegant and well-turned, down to its neat but artificial simile, and it becomes its writer. But the first is emphatically more vigorous and graphic; and the accidental alliteration, "bounced out of bed," actually gives the sentence a power which mere contrivance could never achieve. In a conversation he can dismiss a poor play in this fine salty phrase—" [A comedy] which had not wit enough to keep it sweet." In writing the record he casts it into these elaborate terms: "A play which does not possess vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction." Boswell, who could write excellent direct prose, often made the fatal mistake of trying to wear Johnson's mantle and succeeded merely in making himself look absurd. Thus: "As we neared my domicile, he proposed, the night being still young, that I should repair with him to his rooms for a final libation." Why not "for a binder?" And again, for "bedtime" he perpetrates this horror: "the hour at which he had habituated himself to expect the oblivion of repose."

Typical jargon is long-winded and periphrastic. Polonius and Micawber are representatives of the genuine old school. But modern journalism, aided and abetted (as they would say) by the writers of film captions, have developed a new variety. The new jargon, a variety of telegraphese, sacrifices everything to brevity, or rather to space, for in these days space is money. The gentlemen of the old school are to be preferred because they cultivated jargon as a hobby and not as a commercial device. One of the determinants of the new jargon is the width of a news column or of a newspaper placard—which compels editors to strait-jacket their announcements into monosyllables; "Eton-Crop Girl Thief's Dash"—three nouns telescoped into each other, and each qualifying adjectivally the one that comes after it. Other specimens of this potted prose are: "Beach Murder Trial Court Scene," "Princess Braves Jam" (the Princess goes out during a transport strike). The inevitable ambiguity of these concentrated headlines appears again in the following example: "Miss Sybil Thorndike Ill. Hit By Understudy." And some unravelling is necessary to understand this one: "Trunk Corpse Name Clue."

Like any other kind of pomposity Jargon can be very entertaining; and sometimes it is written deliberately to

amuse. Dickens employs the device hundreds of times, often to the point of tediousness. Thus, of Mr. Winkle, who has been invited to ride a horse: "Mr. Winkle did entertain considerable misgivings in the very lowest recesses of his own heart, relative to his equestrian skill"; and again, "The tall quadruped evinced a decided inclination to back into the coffee-room window." Lamb, with greater subtlety, uses the same trick. Holidays he playfully called "those consolatory interstices and sprinklings of freedom." Ears he described as "those exterior twin appendages, hanging ornaments, and (architecturally speaking) handsome volutes to the human capital." It is the deliberate incongruity of such terms which makes them amusing.

## IX

### FOREIGN TERMS

Another manifestation of literary gentility is a predilection for foreign words and phrases. Bacon has something apposite to say about those who, returning from foreign parts, affect in their dress and in their speech the habits and the terms of the countries they have visited. Jargoneers do not need to have been in France to justify to themselves their fondness for French phrases; and it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the proportion of French terms in a piece of writing bears an inverse ratio to the writer's knowledge of the language. Their knowledge of Latin again may be limited to the classical quotations at the end of an English dictionary; but that does not deter them flourishing at every opportunity their poor withered nosegays of Latin tags.

Two principles should govern the use in English prose of foreign expressions. Every language has its untranslatable terms, words and phrases whose *cachet* (as they say) fades when translation is attempted. This kind of classification of foreign terms, which are and which are not admissible, must necessarily be arbitrary; and these examples may not be universally accepted. In the category of admissible foreign terms we may reasonably put such words and phrases as: *gauche*, *savoir faire*, *chic*, *zeitgeist*, *esprit de corps*, *nuance*, *fin de siècle*, *éclat*, *quixotic*, *déshabille*, *blasé*, *dilettante*, *quid pro quo*, *protégé*, *intelligentsia*. Such terms as these are retained in their native form not because they are foreign and

decorative, but because they express a meaning for which there is no exact or economical English rendering. This principle should be modified by the qualification that these terms should be used as sparingly as possible. They should be literally a last resort.

That shrewd sixteenth-century critic Thomas Wilson makes a pungent comment on what was a particularly notorious mannerism in his day :

"Some seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mother's language. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say ; and yet these fine English clerks will say, they speak in their mother-tongue if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the King's English. Some far-journeyed gentlemen at their return home, like as they love to go in foreign apparel, so they will powder their talk with oversea language. He that cometh lately out of France will talk French-English and never blush at the matter. Another chops in with English Italianated, and applieth the Italian phrase to our English speaking, the which is, as if an Orator that professeth to utter his mind in plain Latin, would needs speak Poetry, and far-fetched colours of strange antiquity.

I know them that think *Rhetoric*<sup>1</sup> to stand wholly upon dark words, and he that can catch an inkhorn term by the tail, him they count to be a fine Englishman, and a good *Rhetorician*."

The admissible use of a foreign phrase is excellently illustrated in the quotation from the late Professor Raleigh on page 128. *Hortus siccus* is not only an economical rendering for "a collection of dried plants," but is also atmospherically appropriate : it is exactly apt to the idea of botanists' labels.

Secondly, a distinction must be made between true foreign words and anglicized ones. Many words of foreign origin have become naturalized, and so enjoy the privileges of purely native words ; a process which is evidently a continuation of that system of absorption and adoption by which the English language has been made. Dryden formulated the policy which in the practice of the best writers has governed the adoption of foreign words : "When I find an English word significant and sounding, I neither borrow from the Latin or from any other language ; but when I want at

<sup>1</sup> By rhetoric Wilson means what we now call plain prose.

home I must seek abroad. If sounding words are not of our growth and manufacture, who shall hinder me to import them from a foreign country? I carry not out the treasure of the nation which is never to return; but what I bring from Italy I spend in England; here it remains and here it circulates; for if the coin be good it will pass from one hand to another. I trade both with the living and with the dead for the enrichment of our native language. We have enough in England to supply our necessity; but if we will have things of magnificence and splendour, we must get them by commerce." It is by this practice of intelligent free trade in language that our tongue has become the richest in the world. Words whose naturalization papers are in order may be freely admitted, for their presence is an indication that they have a function to fulfil for which no native-born word is adequate. Among them may be instanced: *parvenu*, *garage*, *fascimile*, *entente*, *plebiscite*, *propaganda*, *prestige*, *fetish*, *morale*, *finesse*, *camouflage*, *questionnaire*, *réchauffé*, *wanderlust*. All of which illustrate that continuous process of adoption and assimilation by which the English language retains its plasticity and expressiveness. It is interesting that some of these have become perfectly anglicized in pronunciation, for example, *tirade*; while others, like *garage*, and *amateur*, and *via*, and *bulletin* are heard as often in their native pronunciation as in an English one. By his affected pronunciation of *bulletin* shall ye know the snob.

There are many foreign interlopers to be found in current English prose; and these should be immediately deported as undesirable aliens. They are taking the jobs of good honest English words which are more competent to serve as adequate terms of expression than these invaders. Thus there is that abomination which we may call *couturier's English*, which by labelling clothes and hats with pretentious names makes these fripperies more dear to foolish hearts. "This season's colour is to be *bois de rose*." What's wrong with rose-wood?—except perhaps its unfortunate reminiscence of pianos. Chef's English is another species of the same abomination, which garnishes an honest chicken with unspeakable French frills.

Out of the jargonist's posy of foreign terms we may particularly select for ridicule: *penchant*, *soupçon*, *fracas*, *alma mater*, *personnel*, *résumé*, *contretemps*, *au pied de la lettre*, *au fait*, *comme il faut*, *on dit*, *sobriquet*, *cum grano salis*, *hoi*

*polloi*, *jeu d'esprit*, *savant*, *bête noire*, *beau monde*, *arrière pensée*, *amende honorable*, *cæteris paribus*, *entre nous*, *volens volens*, *per se*, *quondam*, *fait accompli*, *confrère*, *communiqué*, *dernier cri*. *Tête à tête* is difficult to parallel in English; but if we must adopt, why not from Scotland: "We had a crack together."

## X

## CLICHÉS

Jargon is largely the product of a writer's incapacity to express himself in direct and decisive terms, and to that extent may be a manifestation of laziness. Another blemish of prose which is certainly due to indolence is the habit of using clichés: listless anæmic words which have been so enervated by excessive use as to be now mere anatomies of words. Instead of searching for vigorous and accurate words the lazy writer is content to use worn-out conventional words which have served so long as to be drained of all vitality and significance.

Cliché is a technical word. It designates a zinc or copper plate, capable of making the same impression of printed words thousands of times over. A literary cliché, therefore, is a stereotyped word or phrase, one which has not been thought out and selected exclusively for an individual use. Certain adjectives and adverbs have lived for years in a sluggish domestic alliance with certain nouns and verbs: *a resounding crash*, *a sickening thud*, *a desperate remedy*, *severely alone*, *stony silence*, *sickly gleam*, *seething mass*, *blinding flash*. The effect of these complacent and passionless alliances is to induce a lethargy in the prose which they inhabit. It is the business of a careful prose-writer to divorce these lazy couples. His task does not necessarily consist of replacing these stale adjectives by fresher ones. There are writers who cannot bear to let a noun stand alone: they must tie it up to some adjective. The following two passages used by Wordsworth in his essay on poetic diction may be considered in two respects. In the first place, almost every adjective in Johnson's verse is a cliché: *prudent Ant*, *stern command*, *plenteous day*, *fruitful summer*, *teeming plain*, *drowsy charms*. Wordsworth rightly called it "a hubbub of words." The result of using these vapid terms is that the parable of the ant becomes an abstraction instead of a vivid reality. In the second place,

it should be noted that the prose version is almost entirely free from adjectives, and that it is not thereby rendered lacking in vigour or concreteness.

(1) " Turn on the prudent Ant thy heedless eyes,  
Observe her labours, Sluggard, and be wise ;  
No stern command, no monitory voice,  
Prescribes her duties or directs her choice ;  
Yet, timely provident, she hastes away  
To snatch the blessings of a plenteous day ;  
When fruitful summer loads the teeming plain,  
She crops the harvest and she stores the grain.  
How long shall Sloth usurp thy useless hours,  
Unnerve thy vigour, and enchain thy powers ?  
While artful shades thy downy couch enclose,  
And soft solicitation courts repose,  
Amidst the drowsy charms of dull delight,  
Year chases year with unremitted flight,  
Till Want now following, fraudulent and slow,  
Shall spring to seize thee, like an ambush'd foe."

(2) " Go to the ant, thou sluggard ; consider her ways, and be wise : which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard ? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep ? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep : so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man."—*Proverbs*, chapter vi.

Clichés are so constantly buzzed into our ears that the person who wants to write good prose must be always alert to resist the inevitable adjective.

Certain phrases have been so staled in use as to deserve the disapproval of any respectable writer. Many of them are proverbs, and bits of the classics, which have come down in the world, such as " a custom more honoured in the breach than in the observance." Democratic sentiments are out of place in the arts ; that which has been daily used and defiled by the multitude must inevitably offend the fastidious. The chief characteristic of a mob is that it does things without thinking, and that parrot-fashion it repeats the catch-words it hears. This phenomenon explains the survival of such pitiable clichés as *silence reigned supreme*, and *to own the soft impeachment*.

Metaphorical terms coined originally to concretize abstract conceptions may by excessive use degenerate into clichés. So politicians continue to pass such counterfeit coin as *exploring avenues to peace, building a bridge to a lasting settlement, or hammering out an agreement*; and when their efforts are frustrated they announce that *the door has been slammed on negotiations*.

A phrase which is stale and over-familiar may sometimes be revived by a kind of blood-infusion, when the writer uses it in a new way or with some illuminating modification. Here is such a re-minted cliché (from Mr. D. H. Lawrence): "'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' has never entered their souls at all, not even the thin end of it." And another, from the same source: "Liras—liras—liras—nothing else. Romantic, poetic, cypress- and orange-tree-Italy is gone. Remains an Italy smothered in the filthy smother of innumerable lira notes. . . . Through this murk of liras you peer at Michelangelo and at Botticelli and the rest, and see them all as through a glass, darkly."

In earlier chapters the necessity was emphasized of variety in writing. When sentence-forms are limited to one pattern, and when sentences fall into uniformity of length, prose dies of sheer monotony. Similarly, when its vocabulary is restricted to set phrases and reach-me-down adjectives, prose falls into an inexpressive coma. When it becomes static, prose perishes; and the business of the discerning writer is to keep his work not only active and plastic in form, by continual manipulation of sentence-form, but also in diction, by a constant elimination from his work of words that have lost their savour.

## XI

### SLANG

The delusion still persists that slang is the exclusive mode of speech of the illiterate, and therefore that any word or phrase which bears the taint of colloquialism must be excluded from prose. The truth is that the designation slang is used to connote several kinds of expression which are in fact not related to each other save in the circumstance that each of the types is a simplification of formal expression.

A broad distinction may be made into two categories. Slipshod slang, or slang which is simply a degeneration of

terms ; and pure slang, which is a very necessary tonic to the language, and by whose coinages the language has been continually enriched. In the first group are all those vapid phrases which save indolent minds the trouble of thinking out exact terms of expression, and which make the conversation and the writing of so many people as primitive as the chattering of apes. This class contains many words of high lineage which have been abased by vulgar use, such as *awful* and *terrible*. Johnson read Boswell a pertinent lesson on this point. "I happened to say" (writes Boswell) "it would be terrible if he should not find a speedy opportunity of returning to London, and be confined in so dull a place. Johnson: 'Don't, sir, accustom yourself to use big words for little matters. It would *not* be *terrible* though I *were* to be detained some time here!' The practice of using words of disproportionate magnitude" (Boswell quaintly admits) "is, no doubt, too frequent everywhere." *Love* has become a slang word, and goes sadly without its original aura. The same word has to be used to express the exaltation of passion, and also for such a declaration as "I simply *love* meringues." Other words which slang has similarly debased are *gorgeous*, *wonderful*, *absolutely*, and *quiet*—which nowadays has to serve for "a quiet rubber of bridge" as well as for "Give me my scallop-shell of Quiet."

Pure slang is as robust and effective as counterfeit slang is listless and inept. It is a gipsy dialect which can make a very essential contribution to the diction of approved usage. As clichés debase the currency, slang re-mints the worn coinage. It is appropriate that America, so long in literary achievement a suburb of London, should be now providing so many of these invigorating slang phrases. The best of them are naturally metaphorical: concrete phrases which transform abstractions into homely realities. *Rubberneck*, a sightseer, is a slang word which on every count is admissible to respectable prose; *go-getter*, a pushful salesman, is equally effective; and so is *jay-walker* for the careless pedestrian who walks off the pavement into a motor-bus. The vigour of this rejoinder to a long-winded speaker is incontestable: "Say, bo, you've spilled a bibful." And on its merits the phrase *to spill a bibful* deserves admission to prose usage. All that can be said against it is that it is unusual, homely, colloquial—but these are conventional objections and not absolute ones. What



can be said for it is that it is cogent and vivid—and that is justification enough for its adoption. The more that can be done to recover Elizabethan robustness of diction the better for our prose. The word *belly* has gone out of fashion, but it is in every sense—in its rotundity of sound-suggestion, for example—worthy to supplant the bourgeois *stomach*, the genteel *abdomen*, and that pitiful compromise, *tummy*. Another good old word now classified as slang and which deserves readmission to prose is *zany*, a buffoon; and it might well be accompanied into recognized usage by its synonyms *nincompoop*, *booby*, *ninny*, and the American *gink*. *Dinky* is not an American slang but a term in perennial use by Dartmoor shepherds. The word *pluck*, despite its evident anatomical derivation, has long since settled down into polite language; but *guts*, its equally vigorous synonym, is still regarded with disfavour. The strengthening of our language from beneath, from the graphic idiom of the groundlings, may be exemplified by a couple of words coined by the criminal classes: a *flatty* for a policeman, and a *busy* for a detective.

The test which a dubious writer should adopt is this: Is the slang word merely a deterioration, and therefore as negligible as any other degenerate? Or is it direct and vivid and suggestive? Does it obscure, or does it illuminate? One pedagogue writing recently offers this complacent advice: Slang terms may in time become permissible, but don't use them yet. The evident truth that unless slang is here and now adopted by all reasonable and discerning writers it will never become "permissible" seems to escape this cautious loiterer in the rear of the army of progress. The pedagogue's policy is to wait until the slang has become the cliché: its use will then be "permissible." So rapid is the process of degeneration that the one-time slang "as cool as a cucumber" is already a sterile cliché.

The slang of yesterday is the accepted idiom of to-day. Yesterday's slang included such words as *mob* (for *mobile vulgus*), *at a loose end*, *on a cold scent*, *make a clean breast of it*, *break the ice*, *eat your words*, *get wind of*, *make ends meet*, *eat his heart out*, *come to a head*, *to climb down*. The word *dither* is consolidating its position as an admissible word; Mr. D. H. Lawrence writes of "a dithering flame." The expression *to fire him out* on the other hand, is not a modern slang term,

but a Shakespearcan coinage. All of which makes rather ridiculous the attempt to set up a fixed barrier between slang and gentility.

The only caution worth mentioning about the use of slang is that it should be employed moderately; and since the really effective slang is comparatively rare, this warning will be superfluous to the writer of perspicacity. To use slang which is not the most effective way of saying something is an affectation of homeliness which is as transparent as any other kind of pose.

## XII

### EPITHET

A fair test of a reader's power of appreciation is his capacity for relishing a fine epithet; and a fair test of a writer's merit is his capacity for discovering a fine epithet. By *epithet* we mean a characterizing word, an adjective or an adverb; but its function, as we shall see, may be as well performed by a characterizing *verb*. In reading poetry, one of whose chief qualities is to concentrate its meaning into economical and stimulating terms, we rightly estimate its success largely upon the power and the frequency of its epithets. A similar standard should be applied to prose.

It is not to be supposed that good prose consists of a string of impressive epithets; and however much we savour the vivid characterizing words of such early works as the *Morte d'Arthur* or *The Pilgrim's Progress* we must admit that their defects of sentence-structure definitely limit their success as perfect prose. It is evident that much very good prose exists, plastic in rhythm, well-devised in construction, and accurate in diction, which nevertheless contains few single words which carry the reader by storm. Yet it is equally true that a style which combines perfection of form with brilliance of epithet is the consummation of prose composition.

It is natural that the epithet should most frequently be an adjective; but in practice very few adjectives attain utility, let alone arresting significance.

For that reason the average writer would do well to follow Emerson's advice to let the noun be self-sufficient; but it must be realized, of course, that his caution is not intended to apply to merely qualifying adjectives, those which identify

the peculiarities of a noun. Thus it is necessary to distinguish *gentle* rain from *heavy* rain, and a *cracked* bell from a *resonant* bell; but it is superfluous to write a *fine gentle* rain or a *loud resonant* bell. One of the most necessary items of the routine of revision is the deletion of those adjectives which contribute nothing essential; and the same scrutiny should be made of all adverbs. By a sparing use of adjectives the writer can be assured that those he does use are likely to be all the more expressive. An example of such restraint is provided in this famous passage of *Ecclesiastes* :

“Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, or ever the evil days come, and the years draw nigh when thou shalt say : ‘I have no pleasure in them.’ Or ever the sun and the light and the moon and the stars be darkened and the clouds return after the rain : in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the street, when the sound of the grinding is low, and one shall rise up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low ; yea they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terrors shall be in the way ; and the almond tree shall blossom and the grasshopper shall be a burden and the caperberry shall fail : because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets : or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern ; and the dust return to the earth as it was and the spirit return unto God who gave it.”

This rigour of selection does not insist that the only considerations which govern the choice of words should be utilitarian. Prose has a right, no less than poetry, to adorn itself with decorative words. But decoration depends so completely on immaculate taste, and good taste is so inevitably the product of wide and discriminating reading, that only a master of prose may be trusted to adorn his sentence with a decorative adjective. An average writer should practise a discreet restraint in decorative effects. Shakespeare, in prose and in verse, uses adjectives which contribute little to meaning but which make his lines glow with colour. Sense would be amply satisfied if Falstaff spoke of his company as “a hundred and fifty prodigals lately come from swine-keeping,

from eating draff and husks"; but by writing "*tattered prodigals*" he gives the phrase a flourish which undeniably adorns it. The appearance of pine trees is so familiar that to write of *pinnacled* pines adds nothing to their identity; but the adjective, mainly by virtue of its alliteration, is decidedly decorative and justifiable. The decorative effect of the epithets in these phrases is again a sound-effect: a pan of *hissing* sausages, the *trangling* harps.

The fine epithet simultaneously adorns and identifies. When Mr. H. M. Tomlinson writes "a sneering camel" he does more than define the expression of the beast: he arrests our attention with a deeper implication. When Shakespeare describes Falstaff's mob as a "commodity of warm slaves" he characterizes them completely: timid, domesticated, arm-chair recruits who shrink from the rigours of the camp and the battlefield. When we read of Giant Despair catching up "a grievous crabtree cudgel" our attention is concentrated upon the first adjective whose immense import quite outshines the mere identifying purpose of the second adjective. When Ariel reports to Prospero the condition of the drunken sailors—"I told you, sir, they were red-hot with drinking"—the single epithet reveals not only the drunken flush on their faces but the glow of Dutch courage in their hearts. Lamb's description of a poor old quill-driver—"a notched and cropt scrivener"—is not only accurate (for clerks wore short hair in his day) but also suggestive in its reminiscence of a quill pen as well as in its clipped sounds. Raleigh's celebrated phrase "these two narrow words, *Hic Jacet*" contains an epithet which has this same quality of perfect appropriateness. Goldsmith's description of the fields in spring "enamelled with flowers" produces through its single epithet the exact suggestion of a piece of china or a brilliant mosaic which a flowered meadow, seen from a distance, does actually evoke. The word clearly demonstrates the difference between a natural scene and a pastoral. Mr. Norman Douglas writes of a "mastodontic breed of mosquitoes": an epithet which summons up in the reader's imagination the multitudinous terrors which that insect holds for the tropical traveller. He writes also of a "flock of goldcrests investigating the branches overhead, and two buzzards cruised, in dreamy spirals, about the sunny sky of midday."

There is perfect accuracy as well as the charm of the un-

expected in the phrase "a ribald cuckoo." This is an example of the transferred epithet; a word removed from its usual associations to a new union. To write of a "gaudy shawl" is accurate, but nothing more; but to transfer the adjective, as in the phrase "a gaudy night," is to charge it with a powerful significance—it now carries the fullest associations of carnival revelry. Lamb gives a word a fresh endowment of suggestion by using it in a new association. He writes of "Elysian exemptions" for school holidays, those half-day windfalls which permitted him to taste the ecstasies of Paradise. *Elysian* has just the right associations: of something which in retrospect was sweet and languorous and endless.

In all these examples the salient quality of the epithets is their compactness. The fine word is like an accumulator, a small compact store of dynamic energy which electrifies the whole of the sentence in which it appears.

Stevenson wisely counselled the novice to practise the substitution of adjectives by characterizing verbs: instead of writing *yellow corn*, write *the field of corn rippled*. . . . Its colour is known; and the business of the writer should be to bring to life some characteristic which will bring it into the reader's eye. "He went galumphing by" is more expressive than a dozen adverbs could make it. Mr. D. H. Lawrence finds something newly significant to say of a cold bright sky: "There were big frosty stars snapping ferociously in heaven." And no adverbs could so adequately describe trains accumulating in a siding than his vivid phrase: "the trains in the junction squatted side by side." Bunyan achieves the same perfect characterization in "Apollyon straddled quite over the way, and said, Here will I spill thy soul." Mr. H. M. Tomlinson writes: "The flame of insurrection flashed down the bazaar, licked up a few French soldiers who happened to be there, and had almost got a hold before the garrison appeared and doused it." Mr. Lawrence describes a quarrelsome woman in these terms: "She fluttered and flipped like a tart featherless old hen"—a perfect combination of verbs and adjectives. Stevenson was as skilful with the verb as with the adjective. He writes of "the high canorous note of the North-Easter on days when the very houses seem to stiffen with cold." And, "I see women marrying indiscriminately with staring burghesses and ferret-faced white-eyed boys, and men dwell in

contentment with noisy scullions, or taking into their lives acidulous vestals."

The right word should be used unobtrusively. You should light on it, and not bounce on it. That admirable delineator of people and things, Mr. H. G. Wells, sometimes tends to make a fuss over his felicitous characterizing words; flutters and crows about them as excitedly as a hen after laying its first egg of the season.

The attempt to pick out the perfect word may fail if the writer sacrifices accuracy to cleverness. "The clutch of a mosquito" is a failure: the word is inexact, excessive and pretentious. Further, the practice of substituting a verb for an adjective or adverb may be reduced to absurdity if a proper moderation is not observed. There is some characterizing which verbs cannot do. Mr. Stephen Leacock in *Nonsense Novels* pillories this affectation: "'Yes,' he souled." And such a sentence as this is unbearably arch and ridiculous: "As I ran I trod upon many twigs that snapped and scampered from me in positive alarm."

## CHAPTER VII

### DECORATION

**S**IMILE and metaphor are too often regarded as simply a kind of decoration of the plain sense of a piece of prose. A figure of speech may indeed be used purely for a decorative purpose, as a flourish of words which are not strictly relevant to the bare exposition of a sentence. An excess of such decoration makes a style florid and blowsy, like Lyly's. The authentic English prose tradition discourages an excess of adornment; but it would be unreasonably austere to object to that occasional splash of colour which a good metaphor produces.

But the figures of speech are not merely decorative. They may not only colour a sentence, but they may suddenly illuminate its meaning; and even when an idea has been lucidly expressed in direct terms, a supplementary simile may give additional point and force to the sentence. In the fine frenzy of poetry the poet's vision apprehends "a world of figures"; and often they are fanciful and decorative: "The hooded clouds like friars, Tell their beads in drops of rain." But in the finest poetry the figures are concrete consummations of the poet's vision. His business is to create out of the thin air of imagination semblances of reality; and this creation he has to achieve in the fewest words. This principle of economy which dominates poetry inevitably compels the poet to find suggestive images in which is concentrated a highly-charged significance. Thus J. E. Flecker's vision of Arab dhows drifting on the Mediterranean is compacted into a simile which not only adorns the line with a decorative image but which is also full of precision:

" I have seen old ships sail like swans asleep  
Beyond the village which men still call Tyre "

Simile and metaphor are, then, part of the texture of fine

poetry. - Prose also, though not under the same rigorous necessity of compressing its ideas and perceptions into graphic and economical images, may irradiate its plain meaning with the suggestiveness of the figures of speech.

Metaphor is most frequently packed into a single word, and is thus radically a more integral part of the idea of a sentence than a simile, which is generally a supplementary illustration. The commonest form of metaphor is the transfer of the name of one object or person to another, the point of the transfer being that the metaphor singles out for emphasis the salient features of the person or object designated in the metaphor. This species of metaphor is, of course, continually practised in daily speech. A hundred times a day we are calling things by the name of other things in order to emphasize their outstanding qualities. We use this shorthand form of expression in such phrases as *a washout*, *a windbag*, *a white elephant*, *a dark horse*, *a Don Juan*, *a turncoat*, *a shark*, *a big gun*, *a swine*, *a free lance*, and *a popinjay*. And the leader-writer of *The Puddlecombe Gazette and East Essex Advertiser* finds it second nature to dribble from his pen such phrases as: "Unless the ship of state is entrusted to safer hands than those of the present crew of blunderers we shall soon find ourselves drawn irresistibly into the vortex of Charybdis or hurled against the rocks of Scylla."

The first essential is that the simile or metaphor should be apt. No analogy is ever exact; and a metaphor certainly need not be a precise concretization of an idea. Its purpose is to emphasize *one* aspect of an idea, not to give a comprehensive impression of it. Thus there may very well be an element of caricature in a metaphor. When we call a man *a skunk* we simply want to draw attention to the circumstance that one of his characteristics is shared by that vile little animal: his noisomeness. What the metaphor lacks in accuracy it compensates for by its intensity of stimulus. This suggestive imaginative quality is manifest in W. H. Hudson's description of monkeys in the jungle—"mountebank angels, living their fantastic lives far above earth in a half-way heaven of their own." When Stevenson is seeking to express the abstract idea that life seen through the second-hand medium of books is a poor substitute for actual experience he lights upon a most illuminating comparison: "It seems a pity to sit like the Lady of Shalott peering into a



mirror with your back turned on all the bustle and glamour of reality." The Italian who described a steamer as "smoking a cigarette" said with perfect brevity and suggestiveness what would need far many more words to say in non-metaphorical language. So long as the comparison is not far-fetched it may be unexpected; and this quality often accounts for the success of the simile. T. E. Lawrence is writing of an Arab pool into which the Turks had thrown dead camels to foul the water: "One of the Howeitat . . . slipped on the wet edge into the water. Its green carpet closed oilily over his head and hid him for an instant; then he came up . . . leaving behind him a black hole in the scum from which a stench of old meat rose like a visible pillar." The homeliness of the simile certainly need be no impediment to its effectiveness: witness Mr. Bernard Shaw's vivid description of a cavalry charge: "It's like slinging a handful of peas against a window-pane: first one comes, then two or three close behind; and then all the rest in a lump."

If the image is incongruous or far-fetched it fails in its purpose of stimulus; but congruity is relative, and what may irritate one reader may satisfy another. Mr. James Joyce's phrase about a shirt "crucified on a clothes line" will be incongruous, and perhaps more, to those who have but one association for the word *crucify*; and yet will satisfy those more catholic in appreciation by its very unexpectedness and aptness. Boswell flaunts this ridiculously affected image: "That day Coruisk (a Scotch loch) bore a sulky countenance, and was attired in the wildest, fiercest, gloomiest apparel to be found in its extensive wardrobe." Lamb's accounts of the tears of Ulysses is equally excessive: "As if their sluices had burst, they came out like rivers." A modern story-teller allows himself this pretentious effect: "A lanky gas tube swooped from the middle of the ceiling towards the middle of the tablecloth as if burning to discover whether that was pink or saffron or fawn." Dickens, never too safe from lapses of this kind, uses this very far-fetched and unconvincing image: "It was a rimy morning, and very damp. I had seen the damp lying on the outside of my little window as if some goblin had been crying there all night and using the window for a pocket-handkerchief." This is the kind of pretty nonsense which the art-and-crafty people try to palm off on the direct and unsentimental minds of innocent children.

Incongruity has a blood relation in mixed metaphor, a turn of expression which has been absurdly abused. It is true that the image presented by a mixed metaphor is like that projected on to the screen when the film operator fumbles his reels and superimposes one picture on the top of another. But the mixed metaphor is almost always the product of an exuberant fondness for the concrete, and to that extent is a much less reprehensible habit than pedants have assumed. It possesses, too, the salt of humour. Even such a glaring confusion as this from an essay on Trousers, is at least amusing: "The third type of trousers is the crowning glory of the male toilet: Oxford bags."

The function of prose is to make plain its meaning in terms which are not only exact but also stimulating; and in the best English prose we may find images as potent as anything in great poetry. The few examples which follow illustrate the qualities which the ideal figure should have: congruity, stimulus, economy, and freshness. The best prose is concrete; and a writer who seeks the concrete inevitably finds himself writing in simile and metaphor. Bacon makes his stodgy platitudes endurable only by the sudden illumination of such a sentence as "... if any man should do wrong merely out of ill nature, why, yet it is but like the thorn or briar, which prick and scratch because they can do no other." And he combines aptness and stimulus in the metaphor: "All rising to great place is by a winding stair"; and in "Money is like muck, not good except it be spread." Mr. D. H. Lawrence describes bored and hungry travellers rushing from the stuffy train to the buffet: "No wonder then that when the junction at last heaves in sight everybody bursts out of the train like seeds from an exploding pod." Mr. Aldous Huxley, writing of the diverting pastime of making up imaginary lives of people one watches in trains and restaurants, illuminates the idea with a perfect metaphor: "From their appearance, from what they say, one reconstructs in the imagination the whole character, the complete life-history. *Given the single fossil bone, one fancifully builds up the whole diplodocus.*" Stevenson hits upon a perfect comparison for the wounded self-complacency of Mr. Worldly Wiseman: "And so he would go his way, ruffling out his cravat with a crackle of starch, like a turkey when it spreads its feathers." Mr. H. W. Nevinson colours his account of the opening of the Russian Duma with some

perfectly chosen images: "On the right of the throne, The Council of Empire ranged themselves, with senators bright as tulips, Ministers planted with flowers and foliage of gold lace down their coats, a whole 'school' of Admirals . . . Field-Marshal and Generals radiant in gold and silver, and the Holy Synod in all the panoply of holiness."

Some of the grandest similes in English prose belong more to rhetoric: Milton's "Methinks I see in my mind . . ."; Jeremy Taylor's "For so I have seen a lark . . ."; and many of Ruskin's and Carlyle's. But plain prose is nearly as rich in felicitous imagery. The Authorised Version, even in those books which are not prophetic or poetic, provides many memorable instances: "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread"; "A land flowing with milk and honey"; "My father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions"; "Let your loins be girded about and your lights burning." Sir William Temple wrote: "No clap of thunder in a fair frosty day could more astonish the world than our declaration of war against Holland." A plain Puritan like William Stoughton, writing of the early American settlers, casts his words into metaphor: "God sifted a whole nation that he might send choice grain over into this wilderness." Dryden, on a distant cannonade: "It was not long ere they perceived the air break about them like the noise of . . . swallows in a chimney." Gilbert White ponders the fanciful possibility that the Sussex downs were made by some titanic baker:

"Or was there ever a time when these immense masses of calcareous matter were thrown into fermentation by some adventitious moisture,—were raised and leavened into such shapes by some plastic power, and so made to swell and heave their broad backs into the sky, so much above the less animated clay of the wild below?"

Swift discovers a pertinent parallel between laws and cobwebs: "Laws are like cobwebs, which may catch small flies, but let wasps and hornets break through." There is Carlyle's definition of history as "the distillation of rumour"; and of the British public: "The public is an old woman. . . . Let her maunder and mumble. She mistakes any gilt farthing for a gold coin." And there is Burke's graphic metaphor on malcontents:

" Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field ; that of course they are many in number ; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour."

## CHAPTER VIII

### AN INDEX OF SERVICEABLE PROSE

**S**INCE this book is intended for the guidance of those who are trying to write serviceable prose, the following estimate of the styles of the English masters aims at distinguishing the grand manner (and its mannerisms) from the tradition of direct prose. There are writers whom we should read and admire, but not imitate; and there are others whose work may definitely help to mould the style of the beginner. But any practice of deliberate imitation is strongly to be deprecated; for when all has been aped and mimed, the assiduous apprentice will find his ideas garbed in a patchwork quilt pieced together from the styles of a dozen masters. The sedulous ape system is a mug's game, as even Stevenson was finally compelled to admit; and if we here suggest the student should take a technical interest in the styles of certain great English writers, we do not advocate any attempt to imitate the postures of the great. Remember Sim Tappetit. But by reading the authors here recommended the student will at least discover what are the constituents of the English prose tradition; and from a study of the masters he may acquire a generalized conception of good prose which will act as a touchstone for his own efforts at composition. He will develop a standard of prose appreciation; and his capacity to produce work which will satisfy that standard will not be governed by his dexterity in imitating the product of the masters, but by the development of his natural talent for composing clear and readable English. The most exhaustive test of prose is identical with the final test of poetry: reading aloud. If it bores or distracts the intelligent listener, it is bad prose. Much prose that appears attractive to the eye will fail the test, and will be exposed as mere flashy and florid writing. Reading aloud

reveals the absence of plastic sentence forms, in Ruskin, for example; and its presence in Dickens, Mr H. G. Wells, Mr. George Moore, and W. H. Hudson. Prose which is not abundantly diversified in its sentence lengths and sentence forms fails the test. And prose which lacks the savour of salty phrases and concrete suggestion similarly fails to be absorbed by the comprehension of the listener.

Early prose is deficient in clarity and in form; but often brilliant in diction; and, especially when it is narrative, simple and expressive. The *Morte D'Arthur* is a rich piece of concrete prose, to be read not for any elegance of form but for its graphic diction. Ascham and Lyly are seldom read in these days, and for good reasons; but Lyly did try to reduce the sprawling sentence of Tudor prose to some kind of discipline; and Ascham helped to break it in to non-narrative use. Hooker, an early apostle of the grand manner, reinforced the example of Lyly in sentence formation, but his work is too tiresomely elaborate to be readable. The value of the Bible as a model of fine prose needs no restatement here. One after another of the great English prosemen have sincerely testified to its example; and all that we need say more is that no one should "take it as read." When your style is degenerating into verbosity and flashiness read again the Story of the Prodigal Son, and you will be brought to a condition of repentance for your riotous excesses of composition. And if you read it often enough you will sin no more.

Bacon's succinct homilies are admirably composed. His habit of distilling his ideas out of the raw material of his notebooks leaves the product free from all superfluous matter. Of seventeenth-century prose there were two types; the elaborate one modelled upon classical examples; and the direct English tradition based upon the example of the Bible. The work of Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne is beautiful enough at times; but for a modern reader it is too beautifully useless to endure everyday use. Of the writers in the direct tradition there are Walton, Clarendon, Swift, Defoe, and Dryden; and Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* is a book to be read again and again by anyone who wants to master a clear and graphic narrative style. Dryden is a landmark in English prose. His function as commentator upon literature and politics compelled him to evolve an

impersonal and critical manner; and for this purpose he found excellent models in French, which had already developed a critical style. It was a call to action which compelled prose to standardize itself for purposes more rigorous than that of narrative; and to develop that incisive but dignified and fluent manner which has been since Dryden's day (with surprisingly few changes) the model of criticism, polemics, and journalism. Bunyan, remarkably clear and graphic at his best, is in bulk tedious and diffuse: especially when he lapses from the concrete to the abstract.

The direct and forcible style evolved by Dryden, and notably practised also by Temple, was immediately adapted to narrative expression as well. Swift and Defoe were masters of plain narrative; and in their tales the student will find for the first time in English a story briskly and simply unfolded. Francis Jeffrey, writing a hundred years ago, admirably summarized those qualities which made Swift one of the safest and most productive models for a beginner. And what he says of Swift is equally applicable to Defoe: "[His style] is radically a low and homely style, without grace and without affectation, and chiefly remarkable for a great choice and profusion of common words and expressions. . . . Swift, without ever trespassing into figured or poetical expressions, or ever employing a word that can be called fine or pedantic, has a prodigious variety of good set phrases always at his command, and displays a sort of homely richness, like the plenty of an old English dinner, or the wardrobe of a wealthy burgess." Between them, Dryden, Defoe, and Swift hammered out the workmanlike prose of the early eighteenth century; but this was still forcible rather than flexible. The business of moulding prose into plastic shape, and of adding grace to strength was achieved by Addison, Steele, and Goldsmith, whose means of making it more pliable was by the development of a more cadenced sentence than had yet been written, and by realizing the value of variety in sentence-structure. The function of adding elegance to clarity was continued by Johnson, Gibbon, and Burke. Johnson's unfortunate diction obscures the excellent qualities of his work; for he was an adept at construction and variation of forms. Ruskin rightly praises that formidable "Johnsonian symmetry and balance in sentences intended, either with swordsman's or paviour's

blow, to cleave an enemy's crest, or drive down the oaken pile of an argument." Burke and Gibbon, much less companionable than Goldsmith, accomplished a majesty of expression; their styles are an amalgam of Dryden's precision and clarity with the best elements of the Browne and Taylor tradition. Johnson, Gibbon, and Burke are too well-wrought. Their periods have gone back to the forge again and again, so many times that despite their lustre they have lost that natural pliability which the finest prose retains. The uses of the freer eighteenth-century prose for narrative is very well exemplified in the novels of Fielding, whose mellow style comes to be a perennial delight to the discerning reader.

The duality of kind in eighteenth-century prose is carried into the nineteenth. Lamb, Landor, Ruskin, and de Quincey maintain the tradition of decorative prose; Hazlitt and Macaulay that of direct and perspicuous prose; and Stevenson and Carlyle attempt, not without success, to serve two masters. Lamb's delightful elaborations are no model for a serviceable style; and any attempt to poach on his eccentricities will very properly be disastrous. But Lamb's prodigality of fine words and figurative phrases will at least remind the reader that good prose is more than accuracy and variety of form. Ruskin had two styles: the forceful colloquial one of *Unto this Last* and *The Crown of Wild Olive*, and the ornate involutions of *Modern Painters* and *Stones of Venice*. His elaborate style is opulent, florid, and full of tinsel phrases, irresistibly suggestive of the flabbiness and gaudiness of Oriental eunuchs; and he has an incorrigible habit of drawing out a sentence till the crack of doom. Landor, de Quincey, and Ruskin are manufacturers of synthetic prose, prose which is curiously devoid of any natural force; empty of conviction; very, very beautiful, but shallow and skin-deep. Carlyle is also, for the most part, too full of freaks and idiosyncrasies to be a reliable exemplar. His prose is virile and compelling; but liable at any moment to be seized by cramps which knot up the substance into incomprehensibility. It is in some ways regrettable to have to recommend Macaulay as a model. Macaulay's writing is too complacent, too cold and uncompanionable; but as a technician he is unsurpassed. He is a master of sentence-forms; accurate and resourceful in diction; and capable



of marshalling great hosts of detail into cogent and graphic paragraphs.

Of the nineteenth-century novelists Scott is a good craftsman, but liable to lapses into careless construction. Jane Austen's style is demure yet polished and vivacious: a style of perfect breeding. Dickens can be very bad, although his slapdash methods often conceal his defects. Dickens is the comedian who, having unexpectedly raised a laugh, keeps on repeating the joke: as with his famous circumlocutions. His temporary Thackeray is a much finer writer, liable, it is true, to careless constructions, but very competent in the devising of graceful periods. His writing has the flavour of an old vintage, much more satisfying than the fizzy stone-ginger of Dickens. One of the best of the nineteenth-century writers was Borrow, than whom none can more perfectly accomplish vivid prose miniatures of people and places.

Pater's style is a feat of virtuosity but no model for daily use; he is another of the synthetic prosemen. He keeps a perfect length, and he has an irreproachable sense of pattern; and his arrangement of the parts of a long complex sentence is as pleasing to analyse as the texture and pattern of an Oriental carpet. Among the miscellaneous writers of the century Samuel Butler and Bates are outstanding exemplars in the serviceable tradition.

The modern product of English prose is incomparably richer on the average than that of any previous age; and there are more living authentic prose writers than any other generation or century has possessed. Lustrous and impeccable writing is by no means the rarity it was in almost every earlier epoch. Even the everyday novel of no distinction attains a standard of competence in style which no previous age can challenge. And a full recognition of the debt which contemporary prose owes to those who have gone before to make the rough places plain should not diminish our appreciation of the intrinsic merit of our own prose. In a nutshell it may reasonably be said that the new masters, inheriting a prose of graceful line moulded in the tradition of the eighteenth century, have reinforced elegance of form with splendour of colour. Of the novelists of to-day who write a free and supple concrete prose Mr. George Moore, Mr. Galsworthy, and Conrad are the first of the older school, and Mr. Aldous Huxley, Mr. F. Brett Young, and Mr. Osbert

Sitwell of the younger school. And outside both schools is Mr. James Joyce, whose *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* contains some of the finest modern writing. Mr. Arnold Bennett and Mr. H. G. Wells are less free from blemishes than their contemporaries, but Bennett's *Clayhanger* and Wells's *Kipps* and *Mr. Polly* are notable examples of vigorous and stimulating prose. Mr. D. H. Lawrence has some disconcerting mannerisms, but he can bring a scene to life with less effort than most living writers.

The belles lettrists of to-day are a powerful band of writers ; and those who are looking for graphic and finished writing will find it in abundance in the clean terse essays of Mr. Belloc, the mature allusive style of Mr. Norman Douglas, the limpid sensitive writing of Mr. Percy Lubbock, the richly-flavoured and delicate prose of Mr. H. M. Tomlinson, the mellow elegance of Mr. Max Beerbohm, the robustness of Mr. Chesterton, and the lucid and forceful prefaces of Mr. Bernard Shaw. Outside these categories there remain two great prose writers, of yesterday, rather than of to-day, whose affinities with this century are not so well-defined as those of their contemporaries : W. H. Hudson, and C. M. Doughty ; the first a master of descriptive writing, the second the author of one of the world's greatest travel books, *Arabia Deserta*, whose oddities of style conceal an uncommonly rich and vivid personality. Of the modern Americans the best are Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, Mr. Thornton Wilder, and Mr. Hemingway. And Mr. H. L. Mencken is a master of vigorous and concrete invective.

This kind of thumb-nail appraisal of the writers of serviceable prose is as irritating to write as it is, no doubt, to read ; but it may serve to show the novice where he may find the best exemplars. There is a fairy story about a celebrated artist whose success had engendered in him a cast-iron complacency : until one day he saw a damsel whose beauty blinded the sun. He tried, and failed, to paint her perfection ; and in despair abandoned his art, and began life over again as a trainer of performing elephants. An attempt to copy the masters of prose may develop in the zealous student a similar resolution ; and, after all, the consequences might not really be deplorable.

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